SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS:

OR,

A PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

OF THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

IN THE

OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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Search the Scriptures. John v. 39.
All these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition. 1 Cor. x. 11.

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

VOLUME THE SECOND,

CONTAINING

THE PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

FROM THE TIME OF THE JUDGES

TO THE END

OF THE

OLD TESTAMENT.

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SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

E L I.

CHAPTER I.

Eli, high priest and judge—rashly censured Hannah—blessed her—pleased with Samuel—unhappy in his own two sons, whom he reproved, but too tenderly—rebuked and threatened by the Lord—meekly submitted—trembled for the ark of God, and died upon its being taken.

THE characters of men are various; nor is it easy to assign to each his proper place. For though all will finally be ranked and treated "according to truth," and though many, even under our own observation, discover at once their real state and dispositions, yet not a few are of so dubious a cast, that we cannot with confidence pronounce concerning them. No wonder, therefore, that cases of this kind meet us in the sacred history. Almost every example, there proposed to us, will furnish us with "instruction in righteousness;" but it is not necessary, that we form a

decided opinion of each person, whose name is recorded. Some circumstances may incline us to favour them, and others may bias our minds against them. Our sentence, however, if we should venture to deliver any, cannot affect their interest in the court of heaven, where their character is infallibly discerned, and their eternal state has long since been unalterably determined.—But we are called, not so much to sit in judgment on our fellow creatures, as to examine our own hearts, and to learn what line of conduct we ought to pursue. While we are considering, then, the inspired account of this or that life, let us enquire, To what description do we belong? It will answer but a poor purpose, to know what others are, if we be strangers to ourselves.

In passing through the different periods of scripture history, we do not stop to contemplate every minute transaction, or investigate the character of all those, to whom any reference is made; for that would lead us into a field, far too extensive for our plan. But we have endeavoured to select such, as are of peculiar eminence, and afford the most useful lessons of instruction. Little, indeed, is told us concerning the man, to whom we now turn our attention, but we may learn much from his example. Eli, we believe, was possessed of real piety; but, though he filled a most important station, his religion did not appear in a conspicuous and honourable light. In some parts of his conduct, at least, as a Parent, a Magistrate, and a Priest, he was shamefully remiss and negligent: on which

which account he came under the displeasure of God, and his case is held out as a warning to us.

Not long after the death of Joshua, there was an awful declension in the state and character of the Israelites *. The worship of God, which had been so solemnly established, was not faithfully and uniformly maintained; and iniquity spread very rapidly amongst them. There was also much confusion in their civil polity. We observe no vigorous exertion of power, for the punishment or restraint of evil doers; but again and again we read, that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The anger of the Lord, therefore, was kindled against them, and, to chastise as well as to repress their licentiousness, He repeatedly "gave them into the hand of the heathen; and they that hated them ruled over them." Yet He did not utterly forsake them. He had compassion upon them in their distress, and frequently, by the most gracious interposition, wrought deliverance for them. He himself, indeed, preserved the supreme authority, and directed the management of all their public affairs. Their government, therefore, was properly a THEOCRACY; and their chief acting magistrate was no other than the vicegerent of God. For the space of three hundred years, their administration was, for the most part, committed to certain persons called JUDGES. These were not so much the stated rulers, as occasional protectors of the people, raised up for a particular design, invested with a divine commission, and endued with wisdom, strength, and courage, to execute the purposes

* See Judges, ii. 10—19.

of Heaven. They were generally made uſe of, to effect a reformation, or to reſcue the ſtate from impending ruin. In ſome inſtances their truſt ceaſed, as ſoon as the object of it was accompliſhed; in others it was perpetual; and then they continued, in their reſpective diſtricts, to adminiſter juſtice, with the full power, but not with all the pomp and ſplendour, of a king.—In Eli the two principal offices, civil and eccleſiaſtical, were united; for he was the High-prieſt, as well as Judge of Iſrael, for forty years.

Years before Christ, about 1156. He is firſt introduced in the ſacred hiſtory, as preſiding over the divine ſervice at Shiloh, when Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was "pouring out her ſoul," with much fervour and diſtreſs, "before the Lord *." From the agitation ſhe diſcovered, Eli ſuſpected that ſhe had been guilty of exceſs, and was at the very time in a ſtate of intoxication. Caſes of this kind, probably, were common: to ſuch a degree did licentiouſneſs prevail. It became him, therefore, as the miniſter of religion, to reprove the ſin; and accordingly he addreſſed himſelf to her in terms of ſevere cenſure. But he had formed a raſh judgment, and thereby condemned one, whom he ought to have approved and comforted.—How often may appearances deceive us, ſo as to lead us to unfavourable concluſions againſt the moſt excellent characters, and for thoſe very parts of their conduct, which are truly honourable! It will be expedient, then, to with-hold our deciſions, even where ſome circumſtances may ſeem to juſtify the

* 1 Sam. i. 1, &c.

harſheſt

harsheſt ſentence, at leaſt till the ſuſpected perſons can anſwer for themſelves.

Eli had been precipitate, but he was open to conviction. Upon Hannah's declaring her integrity, and the nature of her ſituation, he readily retracted his uncharitable rebuke, and pronounced his benediction, where he had thought a heavy puniſhment was due. Such candour in one of an exalted rank is rare. Alas! how few are willing to acknowledge themſelves miſtaken, or to entertain a good opinion of thoſe, whom they have once conſidered as hypocrites!

The aged prieſt diſcovered an affectionate regard to the parents of Samuel for devoting their firſt-born ſon to the ſervice of the Lord *. He bleſſed them and prayed for them. This attention to them, on a religious account, was a mark of real piety in him. For we cannot give a ſtronger evidence of unfeigned love to God, than by manifeſting an uniform and diſintereſted love to thoſe, who are moſt zealous for His glory.

Eli was pleaſed with the miniſtry of young Samuel, who delighted in the ſanctuary, to which he was dedicated from his infancy. But what a contraſt did he behold in his own offspring, Hophni and Phineas! They, indeed, were admitted into the prieſthood, and, by their profeſſion and office, were employed about holy things. But they "were ſons of Belial; they knew not the Lord;" that is, they were men of a fierce and profane diſpoſition, and, though appointed to inſtruct others in the true knowledge of God, they

* 1 Sam. ii. 20.

were themſelves utter ſtrangers to it. This deſcription is remarkable. Conſidering their education, and the ſacred truſt committed to them, we might have expected a different character. Eli, we preſume, had endeavoured to inſtil into their minds the principles of religion, and, by his own example, as well as by earneſt exhortation, had directed them to the practice of it. In ſuch a poſt as they ſuſtained, they could not but underſtand ſomething of Revelation, and the externals, at leaſt, of the divine ſervice. They worſhipped in the tabernacle, and obſerved the rites and ceremonies of the law; and yet "they knew not the Lord."

With the beſt advantages of human learning, and under the ſtrongeſt obligations to acquaint themſelves with God, men may remain in entire ignorance of Him. The reaſon is obvious. A ſpiritual illumination, and the continual influence of grace, are neceſſary to fix and maintain right ſentiments in the heart. We may be deſcended from excellent parents, brought up under their care, their inſtructions, and their prayers, and placed in the moſt ſacred offices, as teachers of others; and yet, poſſibly, we know not the Lord. O let us not reſt in any outward privileges, but earneſtly ſolicit thoſe communications from heaven, without which we ſhall "know nothing, as we ought to know."

We commiſerate the unhappineſs of Eli in having ſuch an offspring. This indeed muſt have been a trial of the moſt diſtreſſing nature. For what is it that good men deſire, next to their own ſalvation, but that they may "bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," and ſee them ſteadfaſtly perſevere

fevere in the way of righteoufnefs? Thofe, then, who are intrufted with that important charge, fhould be moft fervent and unceafing in their applications to God, that He would fanctify by his Spirit thofe, whom He has committed to their care. Together with their ardent prayers, they fhould likewife ufe all fuitable means, information, admonition, and correction, nor ever remit their diligence and attention. It is true, that, after all their exertions, their hopes may be difappointed; for it is not in their power to beftow that influence of the divine grace, which alone can be effectual. But let them not be deterred from the faithful difcharge of their duty. In dependence on the promifes of God, they may expect, that their labours of love fhall not be in vain. Some awful cafes, indeed, like that before us, have occurred, which are permited, probably, in order that none may prefume upon their own piety, and that the work of converfion may more evidently appear to be of God. But moft commonly, where the children of good men are "fons of Belial, and know not the Lord," fomething or other has been wrong or defective in the conduct of the parents. This very cenfure we are compelled to pafs upon Eli.

His two fons were guilty of the moft flagrant abufes of the fervice of the tabernacle, and, through their fhamelefs violations of their office, they brought religion into contempt. They were haughty and impeperious in their carriage, and, for the gratification of their own fenfual appetites, with violent and rapacious hands they feized on any parts of the facrifices, which they

chofe. The confequence was, what might have been apprehended; the divine ordinances were neglected, defpifed, and hated, and men were confirmed and hardened in their profanenefs, while they beheld thefe enormities in the fanctuary. Such will ever be the effect of an ignorant, carelefs, and wicked priefthood.—Not being reftrained in their extortion and their luxury, they proceeded to ftill farther iniquity, and made ufe of that influence, which their character and employment gave them, in order to feduce the women, who for various purpofes were engaged about the holy place. What aggravated guilt was this! We cannot conceive any fins more heinous in their nature, or more deftructive in their tendency.

But where was Eli,—the father,—the high prieft,—the Judge? Could he be acquainted with thefe abominations, committed in the very houfe of God? And did he not interpofe his authority for the prevention of them? Did he not reprove, reprefs, and punifh? It is obvious, that it was incumbent upon him to vindicate the honour of religion, though it had been by the degradation of his own fons. But here, alas! we difcover a difgraceful neglect of duty. Though he did not countenance thefe horrid practices, he was timid, inactive, and averfe to trouble; and probably, having been accuftomed to indulge his children from their youth, he had refigned all his authority to them. At length, however, he was roufed from his ftupor: the abufes were fo public, the outcry againft them fo general, and their fatal effects through the land fo glaring, that he could no longer be filent. He admonifhed,

he

he reprehended the offenders, and that too, with words of the greateſt ſeriouſneſs. He ſolemnly called upon them to anſwer to the charges brought againſt them, and repreſented the heinouſneſs and the danger of their conduct. He warned them, that they were acceſſary to the ſins of others, who were encouraged by their example; that their tranſgreſſions, being committed in violation and contempt of every thing ſacred, were directly levelled againſt God himſelf; and therefore, that it would be vain and preſumptuous even to attempt any mediation in their behalf.

This would have been an affecting addreſs to perſons of any moral ſenſibility. But it had been delayed ſo long, that the young men were become obdurate; and their guilt was ſo atrocious, that the Lord, in vindication of his own cauſe, determined to take vengeance. Therefore, being given up to themſelves, they utterly deſpiſed the father's caution. The reproof, however, which was too mild for the occaſion, argued a very blamable remiſſneſs. The ſinner, who is cenſured in a ſlight manner, is thereby more confirmed in his offences, as being induced to think favourably of them. But the caſe was, Eli was content with reprimanding, when he ought to have done more. The ſharpeſt language ſhould not have ſufficed him; but, by a vigorous exertion of his authority, he ſhould have brought the criminals to juſtice. The reſtraint not only came too late, but it was, even then, weak and ineffectual. Through a fooliſh fondneſs for his children, he did not puniſh them; and thus it appeared, that he was not properly concerned for the

honour

honour of God, and for the intereſt of religion in his country.

We lament that even a good man ſhould forget his place, and not faithfully employ the power committed to him. Yet, we fear, inſtances of this kind are frequent. It will become us to enquire, not only whether we diſcountenance ſin by our example and our advice, but whether we are doing our utmoſt to prevent it. How extenſive is your duty, who are intruſted with the care of others, and are, in a meaſure, reſponſible for their conduct! Parents, Miniſters, and Magiſtrates, the influence, you poſſeſs, is given you, not for your own ſake, but for the direction and reſtraint of thoſe, who are under you; and if it be not exerciſed with a ſupreme regard to the glory of God, He will require it at your hands. While you are remiſs and negligent, you may be complimented, perhaps, as benevolent, candid, and indulgent; but you betray your truſt, and may be acceſſary to the crimes, and to the ruin of thouſands.

The offence of Eli, and its awful conſequences, are more clearly marked in the ſequel. Sin is a contempt of God, and an oppoſition to His government: It overturns the order, which He has eſtabliſhed, and introduces confuſion into the world. It is therefore the object of his abhorrence, and, by his righteous appointment for the vindication of his own authority, it draws after it, even here, a long train of the moſt tremendous calamities. Thoſe, who are deareſt to Him, cannot wilfully violate a plain command, without feeling, moſt painfully, the effect of his diſpleaſure; and

their descendants are often brought into deepest distress, through their folly.

A prophet was sent with an express commission, as an immediate messenger from God, to reprove the Judge, and the High-priest of Israel. In that solemn address, pronounced as from the Lord himself, Eli was reminded of the distinguished favour conferred upon his family, and of their base ingratitude in abusing their privileges to the vilest purposes. He was charged as an accomplice in the iniquity of his sons, because he had not been active to prevent it. He was condemned for "honouring them more than God," because, through a foolish regard to their interest or reputation, he had not degraded them from their office, but had suffered them to bring the house and ordinances of God into contempt. It was, therefore, declared to be the Lord's fixed determination to spoil them of their glory, of which the fond father had been so tender. He was told, that, in consequence of that profaneness which had prevailed through his remissness, he should be witness to the desolation of the Sanctuary, and to a terrible destruction, both of the people in general, and of his own household in particular;—that he should soon be deprived of that power, which he had neglected to use according to the duties of his station;—that his posterity should be reduced to the most abject condition, and die in the flower of their age;—and that his two children, whom he had spared, should by one awful visitation be cut off together.

What effect was produced in Eli by these tremendous denunciations, we are not informed. Probably, he

he had loſt all control over his wicked ſons, or was grown too infirm to make the neceſſary exertions. It ſhould ſeem, at leaſt, that no amendment took place; and it is thought, that ſome years elapſed, during which the divine judgments were delayed; and perhaps a hope of impunity might be entertained. At length however, the ſame declarations of vengeance were repeated, and young Samuel was commiſſioned to reprove the aged prieſt*. The Lord appeared to the child, and expreſſed his firm reſolution to execute the ſentence, which he had already pronounced upon Eli and his houſe, and which no ſacrifice or mediation would be able to avert or mitigate. The ſin of the old man was, in this prediction, clearly deſcribed; and it was alleged as the principal cauſe of thoſe heavy calamities, which would ſoon enſue, that "his ſons made themſelves vile, and he reſtrained them not."

And here let us pauſe, that we may attend to the warning, which his example ſuggeſts. Let each one, then, conſider, and faithfully diſcharge, the duties of his proper calling. In our different ſtations, we are appointed to ſome important ſervices, which demand our conſtant care. Has not the Lord a ſpecial claim upon us, on account of ſome peculiar diſtinctions, beſtowed upon us, or our families? Are we not unmindful of his ſavours; and do we not, by our ingratitude, provoke him to withdraw them? Many perſons fill places of truſt, and poſſeſs various talents, into the management of which a ſtrict enquiry will be made.

* 1 Sam. iii. 1, &c.

made. Need we remind them, that God ſhould be glorified by a diligent improvement of all his gifts? Let them beware of honouring the nearest connections in life above Him. While they prefer the advancement of His cauſe to every worldly conſideration, and are willing to do or to ſuffer any thing, ſo that He may be exalted, they are moſt likely to ſecure reſpect to themſelves. But if, through covetouſneſs, pride, or cowardice, they are more concerned for their own ſupport and promotion, than for the intereſt of religion, they will probably ſink into contempt among thoſe very perſons, whoſe regard they are moſt ſolicitous to obtain. For God hath declared it to be his general rule of proceeding, "Them, that honour me, I will honour; and they that deſpiſe me, ſhall be lightly eſteemed."

A particular kindneſs, we allow, is due to children, for they have an indiſputable claim to a large ſhare of our affections. But, if we reſign our authority to them, and permit them to follow their own devices without reſtraint, we are admoniſhed by this hiſtory, that we ſhall provoke God, betray his cauſe, ſtrengthen the hands of the wicked, and bring a curſe upon ourſelves. Let us call the attention of indulgent parents. How are your houſes governed? Are not your ſons, or your daughters, "making themſelves vile?" Examine their conduct, and their tempers. Are not you anſwerable for their ignorance, ambition, extravagance, and profaneneſs? Have you done all in your power to prevent, or to correct, thoſe abuſes in them, which are an offence to the Church of God? Are you not partakers

partakers of Eli's guilt, becauſe "you reſtrained them not?"

You reply, perhaps, "We have ſeen the bad effects of ſeverity, and our tender regard for our offspring will not allow us to adopt any rigid diſcipline." That is, you ſpare the rod, and hate the child; and, as Solomon expreſſes it, you will not "deliver his ſoul from hell*." Do you believe the depravity of our nature; and do you not therein perceive the neceſſity of ſomething more than inſtruction and advice? The vitious inclinations and vain ſchemes of young people muſt be oppoſed and repreſſed; and you are intruſted with authority for that very purpoſe.—Are you aware of the deſtructive conſequences of ſin, both here and for ever? Surely, then, you will exert your utmoſt ſtrength to preſerve, or to reſcue thoſe, who are committed to your care. Otherwiſe talk not of your love to them: for to leave them to their own management, is cruelty of the moſt horrid kind. By indulging their folly and vanity, you will moſt effectually defeat your own plans for their advancement in life. Probably, through your fondneſs, they may be reduced to infamy and diſtreſs; and reproach and miſery may be entailed upon your poſterity for ages yet to come. Nay, did you conſult only your preſent comfort, you would "have your children in ſubjection." For ſo long as their violence of temper is unreſtrained, your houſes muſt be full of ſtrife and confuſion. But more than this, the curſe of God will follow them; and could your eyes behold all that ſin and wretchedneſs, which

* Prov. xiii. 24. xxiii. 14.

may

may arise from your weakness and negligence, it would be more than your hearts could endure.

But, while we censure the misconduct of Eli, we must vindicate his integrity: for there are circumstances in this history, which discover an unfeigned piety. It must have mortified the aged priest, not only to hear the denunciations of God against himself and his family, but to receive the tremendous sentence by the mouth of young Samuel, to whom the divine revelations were then made in preference to Him. Yet we are struck with his meek deportment in that most afflicting situation. We perceive no risings of envy, anger, or impatience; but, on the contrary, an unreserved submission to God, and a perfect acquiescence in the wisdom, justice, and goodness of His severest dispensations. He appears to have been suitably affected under a conviction of his guilt, and, as a true penitent, to have cast himself at the feet of his offended God, not daring to request a mitigation of the punishment. He said, "It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth him good."—Here was no plea offered, to excuse, or to extenuate his fault; he complained not of the rigour of the sentence, but surrendered himself to the disposal of his Judge, from a full persuasion of His sovereignty, righteousness, and grace.—"IT IS THE LORD: and as He is the Almighty Governor, it is not for me to contend with Him, or to ask, What doest thou? He has an absolute right over me, and may, therefore, deal with me, according to the counsel of his own Will; nor shall I have any reason to murmur, whatever I may suffer; for as He is just and holy,

holy, my punishment will be no greater than I deserve. I have forfeited every claim to His regard; but, so extensive is His kindness, that I may yet hope in his mercy. I will, at least, refer the matter to Him, and leave myself in His hands: LET HIM DO WHAT SEEMETH HIM GOOD."

Such an entire resignation we consider as a very favourable mark. Thus Aaron, in a situation somewhat similar, when his two sons were slain in their impiety by fire from the Lord, discovered the same meekness of temper: "He held his peace*."—So likewise, the pious Hezekiah, when threatened with the heavy judgments of God, replied, "Good is the word of the Lord†."—Let these, then, be proposed as patterns of patience, humility, and faith, to those, who are suffering any grievous calamities through the displeasure of a holy God. But do we perceive no peevishness and anger in persons so circumstanced? Do we hear from them no loud complaints, no bitter accusations against the Lord? We would ask them, From whom does your affliction proceed? Does it become you to quarrel with His appointment? Or can you not account for this treatment? Has there been nothing in your spirit or conduct to merit it? O consider in whose hands you are! Submit to his authority; acknowledge his justice; be encouraged to hope in his mercy, and to depend upon his faithfulness in Christ Jesus. He says, "Be still; and know that I am God‡." From a remembrance of your sinfulness,

* Lev. x. 3. † 2 Kings, xx, 19. ‡ Psal. xlvi. 10.

let

let your mouths be ſtopped, while, like Job, you "abhor yourſelves, and repent in duſt and aſhes."

Years before Chriſt, about 1116.

We haſten to the cloſe of this hiſtory, which is moſt affecting. Some time after the denunciation of wrath againſt Eli, there was war between the Iſraelites and the Philiſtines, and the enemies of the Lord's people were permitted to prevail*. Confounded by this defeat, the elders of Iſrael with a mixture of ignorance and preſumption propoſed, that the ark of God ſhould be ſent for into the camp; like all other hypocrites, truſting to the outward token of the Lord's preſence, inſtead of humbling themſelves before Him in penitence and prayer. The impious ſons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, with an inſolent profaneneſs, conducted the ark to the field of battle. The moſt confident expectations of victory were entertained: but alas! what could be looked for, in ſuch an enterpriſe? Eli, probably, had not been conſulted, or not regarded, on that occaſion: and it appears, that he was filled with terrible apprehenſions for the conſequence. Every thing dear depended on the conteſt. Their liberty, their religion, and their lives were all at ſtake. What anxiety muſt have poſſeſſed thoſe eſpecially, who were concerned for the honour of God, when they ſaw the ſymbol of His favour to Iſrael expoſed to the aſſaults of the Heathen! Such was Eli: He had much to fear for himſelf, much for his country, much for his children; but every other thought was ſwallowed up in his ſolicitude for the glory of God. "He ſat upon a ſeat by the

* 1 Sam. iv. 1, &c.

way-side, watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God." At length the cry of distress was heard, upon the arrival of a messenger, who thus related to him the fatal event of the battle: "Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken."

What grievous tidings were these! It must have pierced the heart of the good old man, to be informed of the slaughter of Israel, and especially of the destruction of his sons, who were cut off in their sins. But these considerations were out-weighed by others still more afflictive. It was the close of the melancholy account, which excited the keenest anguish. "The ark of God was taken:" the Philistines thereby seemed to triumph over the God of Israel; the divine ordinances were removed; and all, that was most valuable, was lost. Add to this, also, the painful reflection, that the whole had been brought about by his own neglect of duty. This was more than he could bear. "When mention was made of the ark of God," in the excess of his sorrow, unable to support himself, "he fell backward, and his neck brake, and he died," having attained the age of ninety-eight years, during forty of which he had judged Israel.

This was a death most awful, and yet it may be highly instructive. We perceive the strongest love and zeal for God, even in his last moments. Alas! where shall we find such an ardent concern for religion, as prevails above all other considerations? In times of

public

public calamity we fear for ourselves, for our families, and for our country. But who trembles for the ark of God? How many would be unaffected, though the sanctuary should be profaned, and trodden down by an enemy? We are favoured with the Gospel: but it is treated with contempt. We need not wonder, then, if it should be taken from us: and to many persons, even this, the heaviest of all misfortunes, would occasion no grief. There are multitudes around us, whom any other profession would please, as well as that of Christianity. But we rejoice, that there are also those, who value the house, the word, and the ministry of God, above their richest possessions; and who dread the loss of these blessings, more than death itself. "O pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee." O pray, that God would arise, and maintain his own cause; that his truth "may have free course, and be glorified." Pray, that, as "a token for good," our spiritual privileges may be continued: for the ark of God is the bulwark of the land.

Eli, we have seen, gave evidence of his piety, even in the manner of his departure. But it should not be forgotten, that he died by the judgment of God, and under strong marks of His displeasure. We doubt not, that he had obtained forgiveness: but he was made to know and feel, "that it is an evil thing and bitter" to transgress a plain duty; and he stands as an admonition to us, that we do not "the work of the Lord deceitfully." It is possible, then, that good men may close their life miserably, and even ignominiously, on account of past negligence, and as a punishment for

their misconduct. Their sun may set under a cloud, and yet not be put out in final darkness.

Is it asked, Why should God chasten them so severely? It may be replied, He is God, and will do what is right; and though for the present we may not discover the reasons of his dispensations, He will make them clear at the last. But the obvious answer is, He corrects his children, because he loves them, and in order that he may purify them to himself*. By such a tremendous visitation, beginning at his own sanctuary, he represents the odiousness of sin, in a convincing light, he warns his people to walk circumspectly, and proclaims an alarm to careless sinners, that they may consider their danger. For "if judgment begin at the house of God, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear †?"

* Prov. iii. 12. Amos iii. 2. † 1 Pet. iv. 17, 18.

SAMUEL.

SAMUEL.

CHAP. II.

Samuel, granted to the prayers of his mother—his conduct and employment, when young—sent to reprove Eli—as a prophet, instructed and prayed for the people—his integrity and diligence—distressed by his sons—rejected by the people—anointed Saul—reproved and condemned him—grieved for him—anointed David—founded schools—died in peace.

THE word of God is a book of universal direction; inasmuch as it suggests suitable counsel to men of all ranks, and in all the various situations of life. If we possess sincerity of heart toward God, and an unfeigned desire to please Him, it will not be difficult to discover, from the different examples as well as precepts of holiness, what He would have us to do, in that particular place which He has assigned us. But if we are destitute of such a disposition, it is not probable, that we shall receive any real advantage from the reading of the scriptures. While, therefore, we are engaged in this employment, let us not forget to lift up our prayer, that we may learn, from the conduct of ancient saints, what is incumbent upon ourselves, and, even by this distant converse with them, may contract a measure of their various excellencies.

 A character

A character is now to be exhibited, which may at the same time humble us for our sad deficiencies, and excite us to greater fervour and activity in the service of God. SAMUEL will appear in an amiable light, on whatever part of his life we fix our attention: for we shall find him upright, meek, and devout from his very childhood, and discharging even to old age, with diligence and fidelity, the important offices which he sustained. Perhaps we may not be called to so exalted a rank, to so conspicuous a station, or to such extensive usefulness, as he was; but if we be influenced by the same spirit, like him we shall be a public blessing in our place and generation.

Years before Christ, about 1156. He was descended, by his father Elkanah, from the tribe of Levi, which was set apart for the work of the sanctuary. There were some circumstances attending his birth, which raised the expectation of his being an extraordinary person. He was a child of prayer, granted in answer to the fervent supplications of his pious mother, Hannah, and named SAMUEL, which is interpreted "ASKED OF GOD," in remembrance of the divine condescension to her requests. He was, also, dedicated as a Nazarite to the Lord, from his infancy, according to his mother's vow. For as soon as he was weaned, it is supposed about three years old, he was presented to the Lord in His tabernacle at Shiloh, with much religious solemnity, and there left to be employed in His service, under the care and direction of Eli *.

* 1 Sam. i. 1, &c.

What

What could be his peculiar work, at so tender an age, we are not told. He was instructed in good principles, and taught to call upon the Lord. In some way or other he assisted in the offices of public worship, according to his abilities, constantly attended upon the aged priest, and observed his commands *. This ready obedience, in however small concerns it was made use of, being performed from a regard to God, and a desire to please Him, was graciously accepted even from a child; and, in consequence thereof, the divine blessing rested upon him in a very remarkable manner. His delight in the ordinances of God was manifest to all; his strength of body and vigour of mind, probably, surpassed his years; he enjoyed the friendship of his God, and his very amiable tempers conciliated the esteem of men. With a superior understanding and much ardour of devotion, he was not forward or assuming, but meek and teachable, diligent in his appointed work, respectful and submissive in his deportment to his Tutor, whom, for his infirmities and remissness in duty, he might have been tempted to despise. He was surrounded by bad examples, and from his situation necessarily connected with the sons of Eli, through whose profaneness "men abhorred the offering of the Lord." Yet, untainted by the general contagion, he appeared eminently holy; and a very striking contrast is pointed out between him and those wicked ministers. While they were advancing from one degree of impiety to another, He "grew on," in knowledge, piety, and zeal, "and the Lord was with him."

* 1 Sam. ii. 11, 18, 26.

Years before Christ, about 1144. At an early period, he received unequivocal marks of the approbation of Heaven. He was favoured with an express revelation, and not only preferred to the high-priest, but even commissioned from God to carry a most solemn reproof to him*. While the young man was ready to attend to the call of Eli, by night as by day, the Lord condescended to address him by an audible voice, and to inform him of those tremendous judgments, which were soon to be executed on the family of that very person, to whom he ministered. Such a communication must have been considered as a peculiar honour put upon him; but he seems not to have been elated with it. He still maintained a constant regard to the work of his station, performing the necessary services of the tabernacle: and so far was he from shewing any contempt of Eli, for the heavy charge brought against him, that, through tenderness and veneration for his office, he was extremely unwilling to relate the substance of the vision. Yet his modest reserve gave way to a sense of duty, and, when pressed to it by his aged master, he was faithful and impartial in acquainting him with every circumstance in the divine threatenings.

How much have we to learn from this part of the example! Young persons, in particular, are requested seriously to contemplate the piety of Samuel, and they will be instructed from him to "remember their Creator, in the days of their youth." It is often supposed, that children are incapable of religion. But many cases, of indisputable authority, contradict the notion.

* 1 Sam. iii. 1, &c.

Jeremiah,

Jeremiah, Daniel and his three companions, Timothy, and Samuel, were all eminent for a ſpirit of devotion at a tender age: and inſtances of a ſimilar kind may alſo be produced in modern times. We ſhould, therefore, be encouraged to apply to God for our infant offspring, bring them, as ſoon as may be, to His houſe, and dedicate them to Him. They can underſtand and retain ſome of the moſt important principles, in which they ought to be inſtructed, and they are ſuſceptible of good impreſſions, at an earlier period than is commonly imagined. They ſhould be taught to worſhip the Lord, as far as their faculties will permit; and, while they are preſented to Him, His bleſſing may reſt upon them, and engage their hearts to enter with ardour into his ſervice.

Upon this ſubject we would beſpeak the attention of children. We refer you to Samuel for a proof, that your waiting on the Lord will be pleaſing to Him, and for a pattern of all thoſe amiable tempers, which will be your brighteſt ornament, and a ſure ſource of happineſs. Learn from the young prophet, not only to be devout, but at the ſame time to be humble, modeſt, and reſpectful in your behaviour toward your ſuperiors, notwithſtanding any defects you may perceive in their conduct. Be diligent in your place, and you will, probably, be raiſed to greater privileges, and increaſe in wiſdom and in every good attainment, as you increaſe in ſtature and in years. This example will teach you a meek and obedient regard to the call of God; ſo that, in whatever way His commands be made known, you will ſay, "Speak, Lord; for thy ſervant heareth."

Samuel

Samuel will remind you, that, if you be favoured above many of your equals, or even preferred to some of longer standing in the Church of God, you ought not to be conceited and overbearing, or to despise any, though justly set aside for their negligence. But your modesty, and your tender concern for others, must not tempt you to be unfaithful to them. Your duty to God may require you to do that, which is very painful to your own feelings; nor should fear, or partiality to your friends, induce you to conceal any one circumstance, which it is incumbent upon you to declare to them.

From that period Samuel continued to receive such divine communications, as fully proved to the whole kingdom of Israel, that "he was established to be a prophet of the Lord." These revelations, confirmed by the strongest evidence, he delivered to the people, and thus performed among them the office of a preacher, with great zeal and usefulness. Yet he lived in a time of extreme degeneracy. He saw the ark of God carried into an enemy's land, Shiloh deprived of the public ministrations of religion, with which it had been favoured three hundred years, and the ordinances interrupted for a long season. In that dark interval, the nation appeared to be sunk in ignorance and profaneness. But at last a glorious and extensive revival took place, probably through the unwearied labours of the Prophet.

"All the house of Israel," being brought to a deep sense of their loss, "lamented after the Lord*;" they

* 1 Sam. vii. 2, &c.

mourned

mourned for His departure, and earneſtly wiſhed for the reſtoration of their former privileges. This was the very effect, which Samuel had endeavoured to produce; and therefore, with great eagerneſs, he ſeized the opportunity of preſſing the matter upon their conſciences, that they ſhould not reſt in profeſſions, but evidence their ſincerity by an immediate renunciation of idolatry, and a ſolemn dedication of themſelves to the true God. Nor did he preach in vain: the whole kingdom ſeemed unanimous in returning to the pure worſhip of God. But Samuel was deſirous to confirm their vows, and to bind them ſtill more cloſely, by a peculiar ſolemnity. A general congregation, therefore, was called together at Mizpeh, that they might enter into an expreſs engagement to ſerve the Lord alone, and might ſeek His bleſſing, by ſacrifice, faſting, and prayer.

When the people were aſſembled, agreeably to his wiſhes, he conducted their devotions. He was then alſo acknowledged as their ſupreme civil magiſtrate, and, from that time at leaſt, preſided over them as their Judge. But, in the midſt of theſe religious tranſactions, they were ſuddenly attacked by their adverſaries the Philiſtines, and filled with terror. Their very diſtreſs, however, convinced them of the worth of Samuel, and of the advantage of relying wholly on the Lord. They were urgent with the prophet to intercede for them; and, while he appeared as their mediator, with a burnt-offering and with earneſt ſupplication, deliverance was vouchſafed to them, and in ſuch a way as to prove, that their ſalvation was of God.

The

The Philiſtines, confounded by a moſt remarkable ſtorm of thunder from heaven, fell an eaſy prey to the Iſraelites. The memory of this very ſignal victory was preſerved by a monument, which Samuel erected, and to which he gave the ſignificant title of EBENEZER, ſaying, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

Under his care and government, the Iſraelites were ſecure, happy, and proſperous. For, during his adminiſtration, their enemies no more dared to renew their hoſtilities: and, according to the power he poſſeſſed, he was invariably and ſtrictly attentive to their intereſts. As a Judge, he conducted their civil affairs with fidelity and diligence, and by regular circuits executed juſtice, and preſerved good order through the land. And as the miniſter of religion, in the place of his ſtated reſidence, he called them to the worſhip of the true God: for "there he built an altar," at which, doubtleſs, public ordinances were celebrated, though Shiloh was deſerted.

We are conſtrained to acknowledge, that a character, like Samuel, muſt be a bleſſing to any nation, and merits univerſal regard. Yet we obſerve from this inſtance, that the beſt of men, with the moſt eminent abilities as well as zeal and integrity, may ſeem to labour in vain, during a long ſeaſon, for the advancement of truth and righteouſneſs. Notwithſtanding their continued exertions, the ſtate of things around them may rapidly advance from bad to worſe. But, even in ſuch dark and diſtreſſing times, let them not remit their diligence, or abate their ardour: as ſpiritual huſbandmen, they ſhould ſtill "ſow in hope." Let them water

their

their seed with much prayer to God, and it shall not be lost. They themselves may live to see it spring up, and produce a glorious harvest; or if not, posterity may reap the benefit. Their work is with the Lord; and they may cheerfully expect, that, in answer to their fervent petitions, He will arise to plead his own cause. —The ministers of Christ, especially, should watch the favourable moment, when good impressions appear, and then redouble their assiduity, in order to confirm and establish any serious convictions and desires in their people. Thus, perhaps, a real change may be effected amongst them, and their professions of religion rendered solid and abiding.

O for such a revival in our own day! O that God would pour out his Spirit abundantly, upon those in the first place, who are intrusted with authority, both in the Church and State! For if men of this description would exert their influence and abilities, a brighter prospect would soon open upon us. But reformation is not the concern of governors alone: it is the duty and interest of all to promote it. And were individuals, though of less extensive power and in private life, to unite their endeavours for this purpose, very much might be done. But where is the zeal of our fathers? Ah! what a stupor has benumbed our souls! To be active for the honour of God, and the salvation of mankind, is now a reproachful thing. But will not God require it at our hands? What should be your conduct, who have children and servants under your control? Will you not be chargeable with their ignorance and profaneness? If you fear that your pains would

would be lost, you should try at least, whether something might not be effected. Whatever be the event, it is incumbent upon you to perform your part: instruct, exhort, warn, reprove, and punish, as the case may demand; and then leave the consequence with God.

You too, who have no influence with man, may yet prevail by your applications at the throne of grace. Come, and use your interest with God; pray, like Samuel, for the people of the land; and you may do more for them, than the mightiest armies can. "The prayer of a righteous man" is as effectual now, as it was in ancient days: and therefore, by means of your intercessions, public calamities may be averted, our fiercest enemies confounded, and all their schemes defeated.

Years before Christ, about 1096.

We return to Samuel, and behold him, at an advanced age, much tried and distressed. On account of his own infirmities, he had taken his two sons to be his assistants in the government*. But these were very unlike their father, having no fear of God or concern for the general good. Through covetousness and other base principles, they perverted justice, were venal and oppressive. This must have been a painful affliction to the prophet; and yet we have no right to ascribe it to any blamable conduct in him. We are not told, that he had neglected their education, or acted improperly in putting them into their office. Perhaps, they had appeared hopeful in earlier life and in a private station, and, seduced by the temp-

* 1 Sam. viii. 1, &c.

tations

tations of power and of wealth, had departed from former professions, and deceived the expectations of their pious parent. This, at least, we know to have occurred in other cases. Some of the most excellent characters have had the extreme calamity of seeing their dear children, unmindful of all their instructions, prayers, and examples, turn out dissolute and abandoned, even after having discovered very promising signs of real religion. The Lord is not accountable to us for the disposal of his favours. But, from his general providence and the gracious declarations of his word, you have reason to look for his blessing upon your offspring, while you are faithfully discharging your duties. And, though you should seem to gain no advantage with them for the present, they may hereafter remember your admonitions and intreaties to good purpose, and, through the prevalence of your intercessions for them, may be recovered to God, when you are sleeping in the dust. At any rate, you must exert your utmost endeavours, and then be satisfied under this persuasion, that "The judge of all the earth will surely do right."

The people, disgusted by the misconduct of Samuel's sons, desired a change of government, and petitioned that a King might be set over them with the same pomp as in other countries. They had some cause for complaint; but their request, probably, arose from a discontented and ambitious spirit, and discovered much ingratitude towards Samuel, under whose administration they had enjoyed peculiar blessings. He considered it as a contempt put upon himself; but instead of reproaching them, he made known his distress unto the Lord.

Lord. The prophet, however, was reminded, that Israel had rejected, not him only but the God of heaven, by whose immediate appointment and continual direction their polity had been conducted. He was therefore instructed to yield to their desires, after having solemnly protested against their plan, and warned them of the consequences. His admonitions were heard with attention and respect; but, when he saw them bent upon a change, he no longer opposed their wishes.

This history may tend to lower our proud expectations, and teach us not to depend upon human favour. For we observe, that men of the first abilities, of eminent piety, and of extensive usefulness, may live to be neglected, and be set aside by the very persons, who have derived singular advantages from their labours. But let those, who lament that they are injuriously slighted by their fellow creatures, like Samuel, commend their cause to God, and He will counsel, support, and comfort them.

A distinguished honour was still put upon the prophet, even in the sight of the people: for their very king received his appointment from him. It was intimated to him, by revelation, that Saul, who was in a wonderful manner conducted to him, was to be invested with the government; and therefore, without hesitation, he anointed him to the regal office*. It is pleasing to behold his disinterestedness, his respect, and kindness toward the man, to whom he was about to resign his authority. He entertained him, gave him all necessary instructions for discharging the duties of his exalted station, and, pouring the consecrating oil

* 1 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

upon

upon him, kiſſed him, in token of his ſubmiſſion and affection *.

What had been done in private, was ſoon afterwards ratified in public. He ſolemnly aſſembled the people at Mizpeh, and, after he had faithfully reproved them for their ingratitude in rejecting the divine adminiſtration, he pointed out their king to them, and declared what ſhould be the form and the rules of their civil conſtitution in future.

Upon another occaſion alſo, after Saul's conqueſt of the Ammonites, when the nation was better affected towards their new ruler, Samuel took the opportunity of eſtabliſhing the kingdom in his hands, and of binding his ſubjects to him by the ſacred rites of religion †. Then likewiſe, in a moſt animated addreſs, he called upon the whole congregation to avow their objections, if they had any, againſt himſelf: but, to a man, they were all compelled to acknowledge his integrity. This appeal, it ſhould ſeem, was made, not merely to vindicate his own character, but that he might thereon ground his accuſation againſt them, for having caſt off the government of God through a proud, unbelieving ſpirit. To fix a deeper conviction of guilt upon their minds, and to ſhew that he was acting as the Miniſter of Jehovah, he ſpake the word, and a moſt tremendous ſtorm of thunder, uncommon at that ſeaſon of the year, excited a general terror among them. They confeſſed their ſin; they reverenced the prophet, and intreated his charitable interceſſions for them, that they might not periſh in their iniquity. His purpoſe

* 1 Sam x. 1, &c. † 1 Sam. xi. and xii.

was anſwered: and therefore he proceeded to encourage them by promiſes of God's unalterable ſupport and protection, ſo long as they ſhould cleave unto Him; but he warned them alſo, that their diſobedience would bring down utter deſtruction both upon them and their king. As to himſelf, he aſſured them, that, though he was retiring from the management of their public affairs, he could not but have their intereſts at heart, and would never ceaſe to offer up his prayers for them, or to inſtruct them in their duty.——Thus was the higheſt deference ſecured to him: and, though he had reſigned the ſupreme authority, he continued to act, with ſome degree of power, in his judicial capacity to the end of life.

The Lord, we perceive, will honour his faithful ſervants; but, perhaps, not in the very way they would have contrived or wiſhed. They ſhould be content to leave to Him the juſtification of their integrity, even when they ſeem to be ſinking into neglect and contempt. Let them be anxious only to fulfil their truſt, whatever may be their acceptance with men. In the conduct of Samuel is exhibited before them a pattern of holy zeal, diſintereſtedneſs, and fidelity, which they ſhould ever keep in view. It is well, when we can boldly appeal to our deſpiſers and perſecutors, as to our ſincerity, and they are conſtrained to bear witneſs in our favour. Yet we ſhould beware, in ſpeaking of ourſelves, leſt we be influenced by pride and reſentment. For our motive ſhould be, not that we may riſe and triumph by the confuſion of our enemies, but that God may be glorified, the cauſe of religion vindicated, good men confirmed in their principles, and

finners converted unto righteoufnefs. But, whatever be the event, though we be deprived of that rank we once poffeffed, and of thofe opportunities of extenfive ufefulnefs we once enjoyed, we fhould ftill endeavour to ferve God and our fellow creatures, according to the talents which are continued to us. No contemptuous or injurious treatment fhould provoke us to ceafe from our pious labours, fo long and fo far as we are permitted to exercife them.

Years before Chrift, 1093.

We have feen Samuel yielding up the civil power into the hands of Saul: but the Minifter of religion will ftill appear, in the fequel of this hiftory, fuperior to the Prince. He had previoufly enjoined the king to wait for his coming till a particular day, that he might offer facrifices for him, and inftruct him in his conduct, before he went forth to battle againft the Philiftines*. Samuel was not unmindful of his engagement; but it fhould feem, that he purpofely delayed his vifit till the fet time was nearly expired. By this delay the pride and impatience of Saul were difcovered: and then immediately the prophet prefented himfelf, in the name of the God of heaven, to reprove him for his difobedience, and to declare the fatal confequences of his tranfgreffion, in his approaching deftruction.

Years before Chrift, 1079.

On another occafion we behold Samuel, with the fame dignity, giving directions to the king, and paffing judgment upon him †. He delivered the divine commiffion to him, for the utter extirpation of the Amalekites, and folemnly charged

* 1 Sam. x. 8, and xiii. 8, &c.

† 1 Sam. xv. [illegible]

him to execute it punctually. But how great was his diſtreſs, when he heard that Saul had again provoked the anger of the Lord by his hypocriſy, and that he had not fully performed the command! Deeply affected with the ungrateful, rebellious ſpirit of the prince, and with the calamities coming upon him, he cried unto the Lord with moſt importunate interceſſions for him. But the ſentence againſt him was determined in the court of Heaven; and the painful taſk of declaring it was committed to Samuel. The man of God, therefore, with all the majeſty peculiar to his ſacred character, "not fearing the wrath of the king," arraigned him as a criminal, convicted him of covetouſneſs, pride, and diſſimulation, very ſharply reproved him for his diſobedience, and pronounced his condemnation. He was then departing from him, with a holy indignation, but was detained a while, in compliance with the earneſt intreaties of Saul, that he might not ſhew him any open diſreſpect, or excite the contempt and oppoſition of the people againſt him.

With the ſame authority, as the ſervant of God commiſſioned for that very purpoſe, he proceeded to execute the ſentence of death upon Agag, the king of the Amalekites, whom Saul had preſumptuouſly ſpared.

This was the laſt viſit, which the prophet paid to the rejected prince of Iſrael. Yet let it not be thought that he was influenced by reſentment, arrogance or cruelty. The very conduct, which a faithful diſcharge of his office required, was extremely afflictive to himſelf. Notwithſtanding any appearances to the contrary, he

he maintained, throughout, a moſt diſintereſted affection for Saul, and, after he had utterly withdrawn from him, continued to mourn for him in ſecret.

The miniſters of religion may perceive in Samuel, with what firmneſs, zeal, and courage they ſhould ſpeak and act. Though in their private capacity they be meek and benevolent, and know how to make conceſſions, yet when ſupporting their high and ſacred character, as ambaſſadors of Heaven, they muſt "ſet their faces like a flint," and have no "reſpect of perſons." They are not exempted from allegiance to government; but, if they are called to addreſs kings and princes, they ſhould do it without fear or partiality, though with proper deference. On many occaſions they are under the neceſſity of declaring the moſt offenſive truths, which may ſubject them to the charge of pride, uncharitableneſs, and ſeverity, at the very time that they ſuffer the utmoſt diſtreſs by the delivery of their meſſage. They will not only labour in public, but weep and pray in ſecret, for the ſalvation of thoſe, whom they are ſuppoſed to condemn with bitterneſs. Yet, while they feel for the awful caſe of impenitent ſinners, they ſhould beware of countenancing their practices by any intimate connections with them, and ſhould therefore withdraw from their ſociety.

Years before Christ, 1063. The grief of Samuel, on Saul's account, diſcovered an amiable and pious temper; but it ſeems to have been indulged to an extreme, and, perhaps, it diſpoſed him to complain of the divine conduct. The Lord, therefore, rebuked him for it,

 charged

charged him to acquiesce in the rejection of Saul, and sent him with an express commission to anoint one of the sons of Jesse, who was soon to be raised to the throne *. The prophet would gladly have declined the task: he gave way to the suggestions of unbelief, and urged the danger, to which his life would be exposed from the resentment of Saul: "How can I go? If Saul hear it, he will kill me." But his objections were over-ruled: he went in obedience to the command, and David was pointed out to him, by a secret revelation, as the person to be consecrated to the regal office.——We also should learn, not to indulge any excessive grief, even for the destruction of the wicked. It becometh us not to reply against God, but to rest assured, that "His judgment is according to truth." Instead of complaining, that justice is displayed in the punishment of sinners, let us rejoice and give thanks, that any are "appointed to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ."

Samuel was now advanced in years, and retired from public business; and yet he was actively employed in promoting the great interests of religion. He is supposed to have founded those seminaries of pious education, "the schools of the prophets," which tended to preserve the purity of revelation, and to provide proper persons for the service of the Church. The institution, evidently, promised the most extensive advantages, and, through the divine blessing, it continued to prosper for many generations. In these schools, probably, the man of God spent the close of

* 1 Sam. xvi. 1, &c.

his

his life: for when David fled from the persecution of Saul, he took refuge with Samuel, who, it is remarked, was "standing as appointed over the company of the prophets *." Thither the murderous rage of Saul pursued the trembling son of Jesse, and seemed likely to have destroyed both him and the aged prophet together. But they were miraculously preserved: for the Spirit of God came upon the furious king, as well as upon all his messengers; and he was confounded in his purpose.

Thus we should labour to the very last, and be zealous for the cause of God, whoever may decline from it. Dangers perhaps may threaten us; but let us attend to our proper work, and the Lord will defend us. "He knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished †." By various methods He defeats the designs of his enemies, and, not uncommonly, by an immediate impression upon their minds, which constrains them, unaccountably to themselves, to abandon their schemes.

Years before Christ, 1060. After a life of eminent usefulness Samuel departed in peace, and his death was much lamented by the whole nation of Israel ‡. How honourable does the good man appear, even in a private station! Though he may be neglected by many, who once professed to revere him, his worth will be acknowledged, when he is taken away, and his loss will be felt by the Church. But while we contemplate those excellent personages, who are now removed

1 Sam. xix. 18, &c. † 2 Pet. ii. 9. ‡ 1 Sam. xxv. 1.

from the earth, we rejoice that " the residue of the Spirit" is with God. May He raise up, among ourselves, faithful witnesses for his name, endued with the same wisdom, diligence, and ardour in religion, which his prophets and messengers of old possessed! By their ministry may He " revive his work," establish his own kingdom in righteousness, and " make our Jerusalem a praise in the earth!" Amen.

SAUL.

SAUL.

CHAP. III.

SECT. I.

Saul, an inſtance of diſſimulation—his extraction and appearance—conducted to Samuel—anointed—received another heart—propheſied—modeſt and forbearing—conquered the Ammonites—ſacrificed contrary to Samuel's directions—reproved and condemned—not humbled—preſerved a ſhew of piety—his raſh imprecations—ſucceſsful in his wars—deſtroyed the Amalekites, but ſpared Agag—convicted by Samuel—rejected—impenitent.

IN this practical review of Scripture Characters, while men of different deſcriptions paſs before us, it will be uſeful to remark the difference of the divine conduct towards them. Indeed, the government of God is ſo extenſive and myſterious, that we preſume not to underſtand, or diſcover, all the reaſons of his various proceedings: but we ſhall perceive ſufficient proof of his love of holineſs, and abhorrence of iniquity. Throughout the whole of his adminiſtration, we ſhall obſerve, that the upright in heart are his delight, and the objects of his care; but that the wicked, whatever diſguiſe they may aſſume, are hateful in his ſight, and that, ſooner or later, they feel the effects of his indignation.

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There have been thoſe, indeed, who, in one period of their lives, were diſtinguiſhed by ſingular favours, and in another were marked as examples of the divine vengeance. Yet, even in theſe inſtances, where God utterly rejects them, whom he once ſeemed to regard with kindneſs, there is no unrighteouſneſs with Him; " a God of truth, and without iniquity, juſt and right is He." Neither is there any change in His purpoſes; for " He is of one mind;" though there be, in our views, a manifeſt alteration, and we may be ready to conclude, from the diſpenſations of his providence, that He has departed from his original deſign.

Such are the reflections, which will be ſuggeſted to us, as we are conſidering the character of Saul. He was raiſed to peculiar eminence by the immediate appointment of God, and by the ſame appointment was caſt down, ſo as at laſt to periſh under ſigns of heavieſt diſpleaſure. From the firſt part of his hiſtory, we are induced to form a favourable judgment of him; for we perceive many things amiable in his temper, and laudable in his conduct. We wonder, then, what was the cauſe of his miſcarriage, and whence it came that ſo hopeful a beginning ſhould have ſo miſerable a concluſion. But is it uncommon for thoſe, who are deſtitute of ſound principles and real integrity of heart, to put on a fair appearance for a ſeaſon, to practiſe many duties, and, without betraying any inconſiſtency, to maintain a zealous profeſſion of religion? Is it at all ſtrange, then, that theſe perſons, when brought into circumſtances of ſtrong temptation, ſhould ſuddenly throw

throw off the mask, and proclaim their own insincerity? Awful as the case is, there are not a few, who, to our apprehensions, begin in the Spirit, and end in the flesh? Such was Saul. Let his example be improved as a solemn warning to all, to beware of dissimulation. Let us be afraid of self-deceit, and not be satisfied with good intentions, or a partial, temporary obedience. Let us consider well the nature of that service, into which we are called to enter, and "having put our hands to the plough," let us not dare to look back, but "be faithful unto death," if we would receive the crown of life. This is a subject, which should excite "great searchings of heart," and very fervent prayer to God.——Thou only, O Lord, triest the reins: Help us to discern our real character; deliver us from all formality and hypocrisy; shew us, whereinsoever we are deceived; make us entirely conformable to thy Will; and preserve us to thy heavenly kingdom.

The Israelites had desired a change of government, and the Lord had promised that their wishes should be gratified. For that purpose the regal office was instituted, and Saul nominated to it. The appointment, doubtless, was most honourable, but no evidence of any true excellency in him. The prince was intended to rescue the people from their enemies, but, at the same time, to be a scourge to them for their perverseness. For thus said the Lord, concerning this event, "I gave thee a king in mine anger *."

* Hos. xiii. 11.

Saul was defcended from a Benjamite of confiderable property: he was the fon of Kifh, " a mighty man of power," and by his engaging and majeftic appearance feemed likely to conciliate efteem, and command refpect with a nation fond of pomp and grandeur *. For " he was a choice young man and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Ifrael a goodlier perfon than he." But he owed not his exaltation to any influence, which he derived from his family or the gracefulnefs of his figure. The power was committed to him by the divine direction; and the Ifraelites were inftructed to receive him, as chofen of God to rule over them.

Years before Chrift, 1095. By a ftrange providence, whilft he fought for the affes which his father had loft, he was conducted to Samuel, who had been previoufly commanded, by a private revelation, to anoint him to the high function. The prophet, therefore, addreffed him with the utmoft refpect, and intimated to him his approaching advancement: " On whom," faid Samuel, " is all the defire of Ifrael? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father's houfe?" Flattering as this falutation was, it feemed not to raife any afpiring thoughts in him. He replied, with a becoming modefty, " Am not I a Benjamite, of the fmalleft of the tribes of Ifrael? and my family the leaft of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then fpeakeft thou fo to me?"

In the courfe of the interview, he was treated with a peculiar deference, and inftructed in the duties of

* 1 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

his

his future office by the wise and pious conversation of Samuel. Upon his dismission, he received from the prophet the consecrating oil, and an assurance, that he was appointed to be " Captain over the Lord's inheritance *." The declaration was so astonishing, that, probably, it staggered his belief: and therefore, to convince him, that this whole matter was ordered of God, and that He would afford him protection, various signs were given him, which were all accomplished on that very day.

" When he had turned his back to go from Samuel, God gave him another heart." A wonderful change was produced in his views, abilities, and inclinations: but it is doubted, how far this change extended. Some have supposed, that, by the sanctifying influence of divine grace, he was renewed in righteousness, and became a holy person. But this is much more than is implied in the expression, or can be inferred from any part of the history. It is not said, that he received " a new" but " another heart:" not, that he was made holy, but " turned into another man." The Lord, who had called him to so distinguished an office, immediately qualified him for it, and, by an extraordinary power, inspired him with sentiments and dispositions suitable to a king. His mind, then, no longer intent upon the objects of his former occupation, aimed at greater things, and thought only of the momentous concerns of government. He was designed to be a brave General, and a wise Prince;

* 1 Sam. x. 1, &c.

for

for which purpofe he was endued from above with underftanding, courage, vigour, and activity.

Thofe, whom the Lord appoints to any fervice, will receive, in due time, an adequate meafure of preparation for it. He, who poffeffes all fulnefs in himfelf, is pleafed to furnifh them, whom He employs as his inftruments, with all needful talents and abilities. But a qualification for the moft extenfive ufefulnefs does not imply any real excellency of moral character. Many, like Saul, may be fuddenly changed, and yet not converted to God; may be fitted for fome important poft in life, and yet not made the children of God and the heirs of his kingdom. We muft, therefore, carefully diftinguifh between the moft eminent gifts and the leaft degree of fanctifying grace. There are thofe, who may be enabled to fill a high department, either in the Church or State, with confiderable advantage to fociety, who may neverthelefs continue totally deftitute of true religion.

Saul was met upon the road by a company of prophets, "and the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophefied among them." This circumftance occafioned great aftonifhment, and, probably, it was defigned to convince the people, that he was called to the government; but it did not prove, that he poffeffed any holy difpofitions toward God. Many, at the laft awful day, will plead their gifts, their ufefulnefs, and their reputation in the Church: "Lord, Lord, have we not prophefied in thy name? and in thy name have caft out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" To whom the Judge will fay "I never knew you:

you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*." And do not some modern professors of the Gospel rest in common attainments, which, though we attribute them to God and the operation of his Spirit, are often bestowed on carnal persons, and are, therefore, no mark of the divine approbation? To describe, and estimate with exactness, the different systems of faith; to dispute with zeal for right doctrines; to talk, and pray, and preach, with fluency of speech, and to the admiration of the hearers;—these are considered as most valuable acquisitions, and on these, we fear, some place their dependence. Yet with such qualifications, they may be proud, and covetous, and contentious, and revengeful, and at last go down to eternal destruction.

But, though Saul was thus distinguished, he did not at that time betray any signs of vanity or ambition. He was not forward to proclaim his approaching advancement, but with great modesty concealed the matter even from his friends; nor did he take one step to seat himself on the throne. Nay, when the people were solemnly convened by Samuel, for the purpose of receiving their king according to the Lord's appointment, and of investing him with his high office, it should seem that Saul, from a sense of his own insufficiency, would gladly have declined the honour; for he had secreted himself from their notice. And, after his inauguration, he was backward to assume any regal pomp; he retired, as usual, to his own house. A retinue, indeed, accompanied him, for the support of his authority; but he did not provide it for himself: it was

* Matt. vii. 22, 23.

" a band

"a band of men, whoſe hearts God had touched." By many others he was treated with inſolent contempt, which might have excited the warmeſt reſentment, eſpecially when he was armed with power: but, with ſingular meekneſs and diſcretion, he paſſed by the offence, and "held his peace."

This is a pleaſing part of his character, and may be propoſed for general imitation. The hiſtory deſcribes him as an obedient ſon, attentive to the commands of his father, and concerned leſt his long abſence ſhould diſtreſs him. His ſurpriſe at the firſt hint of his elevation, his diffidence and humility when the honour was tendered to him, his modeſty and forbearance upon his advancement, have conciliated our eſteem and raiſed our expectations. We ſhould rejoice to ſee the ſame prudent reſerve, the ſame gentleneſs of ſpirit, particularly in young men of eminent attainments. Alas! what conceit and arrogance, what a vehement and vindictive temper, do we diſcover even in ſome, who pride themſelves upon their morality! We refer them to Saul for a reproof. In others indeed, who are evidently deſtitute of religion, we perceive a condeſcenſion and readineſs to forgive, which proceed not from holy principles, and yet render them agreeable and uſeful members of ſociety. We reſpect and value them in their place, but lament, that, while they go ſo far, they ſhould go no farther. What will avail their amiable qualities in the ſight of men, without piety towards God?

Saul ſtill continued in a private ſituation, meekly waiting the event, and, though appointed to a kingdom,

dom, disdained not to follow his former occupation, till the Lord was pleased to call him forth to public notice. During his attendance on his cattle, he heard that the inhabitants of Jabesh were threatened by the Ammonites; and immediately, through the powerful influence of the divine Spirit upon his mind, being fired with indignation; he stirred up the people to oppose their insulting enemies *. His dispatch, and prudence, and courage, were most astonishing. In a very short space, he assembled a numerous army; he marched, fought, and conquered. This singular victory induced the nation to receive him as their Governor, and from that time he was fully established in the throne. We are struck with his clemency in the hour of his triumph. For, when it was proposed, that those, who had been ill affected towards him, should be destroyed for their insolence, he declared his determination to pardon them, and, with an appearance of gratitude and devotion, ascribed the deliverance to God.

From what motive this conduct proceeded, we presume not to assert. But surely the same patience, in waiting the disposals of Providence, the same forbearance towards scoffers and calumniators, are equally incumbent upon all. We know, who hath said, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves †." But where are those, who, with power in their hands, would put up with indignities and injuries from an inferior? How many, professing to be followers of Jesus, stand re-

* 1 Sam. xi. 5, &c. † Rom. xii. 19.

proved for their impetuosity, their bitterness, and desire of revenge!

So far the history has represented Saul in an amiable light: but a melancholy change succeeds. Nor is the case singular. Who does not shed a tear over the multitudes, that have appeared to run well in the Christian race, and yet, through some hinderance or other, have at last "drawn back unto perdition?" Grandeur and prosperity, we apprehend, were fatal to Saul, and have been so to thousands. After two years, we no longer behold him the same bold and generous commander, as before, at least, in many instances he will appear cowardly, mean, and hypocritical. He had experienced the divine protection and support in an eminent degree; but we shall soon perceive him the scorn of his enemies, a terror to himself, and a burden to all around him. This will furnish an instructive lesson. "The Lord is with you, while ye be with Him, and if ye seek Him, He will be found of you; but if ye forsake Him, He will forsake you.*"

Years before Christ, 1093. Perhaps through a love of ease and splendour, upon coming to the full possession of the regal dignity, he neglected for two years to shake off the oppressive tyranny of the Philistines, who therefore improved the opportunity and gathered strength, while his own subjects were dissatisfied with his conduct †. At length the alarm of war was given: the Philistines took the field against him; and he was reduced to a great strait. The Israelites were terrified by the threats of the enemy, and, having no confidence

* 2 Chron. xv. 2. † 1 Sam. xiii. 1, &c.

in their king, deserted him in large numbers. His obedience was then put to the test, and he failed in the hour of trial. He had been charged, doubtless by the direction of God himself, to wait seven days, till Samuel should arrive to furnish him with instructions, and to preside in the offices of religion: but through impatience and unbelief, contrary to the injunction, he presumed to offer sacrifices without him. Immediately, and within the appointed time, the messenger of the Lord appeared, and called the prince to account for what he had done.

Saul, we have seen, had transgressed a plain command; but he attempted, by paltry excuses, to justify his conduct, and even boasted of his attention to the divine service. He pleaded, that he had waited, according to the order given him, that his people were deserting him, and the Philistines ready to attack him; and therefore, that, as he dared not to engage in the war without first imploring the protection of God, he had himself performed the proper acts of devotion, in violence to his own wishes, and of unavoidable necessity. This was specious; but it was hypocritical. Samuel detected his insincerity, and, not allowing any of his pleas, condemned his disobedience, and declared the Lord's determination to deprive him of that power, which he had abused.

Saul laid great stress, as formalists and dissemblers generally do, on the external rites of religion, which he would not neglect; but he attended not to the divine precept any farther than suited his own inclination or convenience. Perhaps he was proud of his authority,

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and, not brooking any ſubmiſſion to the prophet, deſired to convince the people, that His aſſiſtance was not wanted: he therefore, inſolently and profanely, encroached on the prieſt's office; and it will be recollected, that, for a ſimilar offence, king Uzziah was ſmitten with leproſy*. Yet many conſiderations might ſeem to palliate his guilt, if not to vindicate his conduct. It might be argued, that he was compelled by the difficulties of his ſituation, that the action at leaſt was good, and that the preſence of Samuel could be but of little conſequence.—Alas! how prone men are to make light of ſin! how ready to frame excuſes in their own defence, when they tranſgreſs! This, or the other crime, it is alleged, is but a trifle; and, as they are driven to great ſtraits, a peculiar licence may be allowed them.

Sinners, you deceive yourſelves. Nothing can juſtify a plain neglect of duty, in the moſt minute inſtance. Beware of "contemning ſmall things;" leſt you "fall by little and little." To call that a trifle, which is a breach of an expreſs command, is to ſet aſide or depreciate the authority of God. You might account the offence of your firſt parents as of no vaſt magnitude; but, by the juſt judgment of God, it has "brought death into the world, and all our woe." The Lord only knows the ſecret ſprings of action; and, in His ſight, that conduct may be baſe and deteſtable, as the ſacrifice of Saul was, which before men may ſeem proper and laudable. You may be involved in dangers and diſtreſſes, like Saul; but in thoſe very circum-

* 2 Chron. xxvi. 19.

ſtances,

ſtances, you are required to evince your faith and obedience. If you are not willing to truſt and ſubmit to God in the utmoſt perplexities, we may fear you have no real regard to him at all.

It had been declared, that the government of Saul ſhould not continue, on account of his contemptuous violation of the divine command. He was ſtill kept upon his trial; but no favourable change appeared. Nay, the very awful denunciation of the prophet produced not any good effect. We perceive no marks of humiliation; we hear not one petition to God for the pardon of his offence. And, when the judgments and "terrors of the Lord" make little or no impreſſion upon ſinners, we have cauſe to apprehend, that their caſe is hopeleſs indeed.

The king of Iſrael, probably, being diſpleaſed with Samuel's faithful reproof, wiſhed for no more communications with him. Yet he did not therefore caſt off the profeſſion of religion. He procured the high-prieſt from Shiloh to attend him in the camp, and perhaps was ſatisfied with the preſence and the ſervices of a miniſter, who would not be ſo troubleſome to him, as Samuel had been*. But, whilſt he ſhould have been leading his forces againſt the Philiſtines, he was weak, fooliſh, and dejected. With a ſmall company of ſix hundred men, who were alſo diſpirited, he ſeemed to retire from them, at leaſt not to poſſeſs courage enough to attack them.

The proſpect was dark: for what could be expected in favour of Iſrael, when God had been provoked by

* 1 Sam. xiv. 2, &c.

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their king, at the very entrance upon this expedition? Yet He graciouſly interpoſed for the deliverance of his people, whilſt He ſhewed the ſtrongeſt diſapprobation of Saul. Jonathan, the young prince, and his armour-bearer, with an holy ardour and confidence in God, which aſtoniſh us, ruſhed into the camp of the Philiſtines, and, through their means, that mighty army was put to flight and vanquiſhed.

Saul, indeed, upon the noiſe of the battle, with great impatience purſued the enemy; but it ſhould ſeem, that his raſh and impolitic behaviour, in reſtraining his men from food, rather interrupted than aſſiſted the ſlaughter. With a ſemblance of devotion, he ſtopped to offer ſacrifice; and on that occaſion it is remarked, that "he built his firſt altar unto the Lord." Can any thing more clearly prove his hypocriſy? In his beſt days, he had neglected the divine ſervice, and never diſcovered any true zeal for the ſupport of religion. But now, in a ſtate of apoſtaſy from God, to ſalve his conſcience, and to preſerve appearances, he procures the attendance of a miniſter, and, for the firſt time, erects a place for public worſhip. There is, then, a ſhow of piety, and an external regard to ordinances, which perſons of the worſt principles and diſpoſitions may maintain. But theſe are unavailing and deteſtable, in the ſight of God.

Saul was eager to proceed in the purſuit of the Philiſtines, but, upon the propoſal of the high-prieſt, he waited to conſult the Lord. No anſwer was given; whence the concluſion was evident, that the diſpleaſure of Heaven had been incurred. Who, then, was the offender?

offender? Through the raſh and profane imprecation of Saul, Jonathan was unwarily brought into condemnation, for having taſted a little food in the fatigues of the battle: and immediately the cruel father, moſt ſevere in his animadverſions upon his pious ſon, and not humbling himſelf for his own miſconduct, which was the real cauſe of the diſtreſs, prepared to take vengeance on him. But the amiable youth was reſcued by the interpoſition of the people in his favour; and thus the reproof fell upon the head of the king. After this incident, which ſeems to have excited diſguſt in the mind of Saul, he retired from the purſuit of the enemy, and neglected to improve the victory. What do we obſerve in the whole of his behaviour on this occaſion, but an impetuous, proud, malignant, and impious diſpoſition? And do we not, in every inſtance, perceive, that man, left to himſelf, betrays the ſad depravity of his nature, and is enſlaved to the baſeſt tempers?

Notwithſtanding the threatenings, which had been denounced againſt Saul, the Lord was pleaſed to make uſe of him as an inſtrument of protecting his people, and of chaſtiſing their oppreſſors. He obtained various ſucceſſes in war; and in the mean time a further probation was allowed him. But, perhaps, his very proſperity proved a ſnare to him, and prevented him from attending to his guilt and danger. The Lord is long-ſuffering toward ſinners, who are the declared objects of his wrath; and, while he is pouring down temporal comforts upon them, he gives them full opportunity of manifeſting their real characters. But

their continued impenitence will at length bring on them complete and final destruction.

Years before Christ, about 1079. The following transaction exhibits the Jewish prince in his true colours; and it was designed to draw forth and evince the hypocrisy of his heart. His obedience was again put to the test by the express direction of God; and he was found to be unfaithful and rebellious. The prophet Samuel, who had, probably, been avoided on account of his former reproofs, was sent to the king, requiring him, in the name of Jehovah from whom he had received his power, and as ever he wished to testify his regard to the divine authority, to go and utterly destroy the Amalekites*. It was alleged, that this sinful nation, particularly for their injurious treatment of the Israelites, was doomed, by the righteous judgment of Heaven, to entire desolation. He was, therefore, charged to pay no respect to age or sex, and to kill both man and beast. Without hesitation, and with great ardour, he proceeded to execute the commission. A numerous army was summoned, with which he attacked and conquered the Amalekites. But his insincerity was manifested, in "doing the work of the Lord deceitfully." For, through some base principles, probably through covetousness or ambition, he spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and destroyed only so much of the spoil as was worthless, reserving all that was valuable for his own emolument. This is a frequent case. Many will serve God with alacrity and zeal, so long as they are thereby promoting their own temporal

* 1 Sam. xv. 1, &c.

interest,

intereſt, but, when their duty militates againſt their ſelfiſh ſchemes, they diſcover their unſoundneſs, and will rather renounce their allegiance to God, than forego their preſent advantage. But will He accept a partial obedience? Will He not reject with diſdain ſuch hypocrites, as profeſs to honour him, and yet tender him only the ſervice, which is convenient or profitable to themſelves? "Be not deceived: God is not mocked."

The divine indignation was kindled againſt Saul; and the ſame prophet, who had given him the commiſſion, was ſent to reprove him for the unfaithful execution of it. The haughty monarch, indeed, proud of his ſucceſs, had erected a trophy for his own glory; and, as if he were not conſcious of any crime, he went up to Samuel, with an appearance of devout reſpect and of great confidence, and began to boaſt that he had done his duty. But he was immediately convicted on the plaineſt evidence: the bleating of the ſheep and the lowing of the oxen, which had been ſpared, were ſufficient proofs againſt him.—It is always a ſuſpicious ſign, when men are forward to proclaim their own obedience; for, in general, thoſe are moſt ready to tell of their doings, who are moſt defective. If we are conceited of our goodneſs, let us examine, Is there nothing in our tempers or conduct, which gives the lie to our profeſſion? May we not be detected, as Saul was, by ſome manifeſt inconſiſtencies?

The diſſimulating prince was unwilling to yield to the reproof: which was another unfavourable ſymptom.

tom. He endeavoured to caſt the blame from himſelf upon the people, alleging, that they had been the cauſe of preſerving the choiceſt of the ſpoil, and that, if the action were in ſome degree wrong, the motive at leaſt was excellent, as they meant to devote the prey to religious purpoſes. This was a poor ſubterfuge indeed. For, if the people were diſpoſed to violate their duty, it was His part to direct and reſtrain them; and to give up his authority to them was no other than treachery to God. It ſhould ſeem alſo, that his plea of a good intention was both frivolous and falſe: frivolous, becauſe a pious deſign will never juſtify what is really criminal in itſelf; and falſe, becauſe covetouſneſs, not devotion, was the leading principle in the tranſgreſſion. Samuel, therefore, would not allow the excuſe, but condemned his conduct, as evincing a ſad change, proceeding from a haughty and rapacious ſpirit, and implying an avowed contempt of God. Still the king continued to vindicate himſelf on the very ſame ground, and maintained his own integrity.—Ah! how difficult it is, to bring ſinners to an acknowledgment of their offences! But ſurely it is a mark of a proud and unhumbled heart, to caſt about for apologies, and to fly from one evaſion to another, in defence of that which is evil.

At length however, Saul put on the ſemblance of a penitent. When he perceived the prophet's firmneſs in reproving him, and had heard the ſolemn declaration, that he muſt be driven from his kingdom, he made a confeſſion of his ſin, yet in ſuch a way as to diſcover his hypocriſy. He cried out, indeed, "I have ſinned," but

but was ſtill deſirous to find ſome extenuation of his crime; and therefore he alleged, that he had done it, only through a timid compliance with the people. This was not probable: for in other reſpects, when his own honour was concerned, he was tenacious enough of his authority: or, if true, it was no vindication of him, becauſe he ſhould have ſcrupulouſly followed the divine direction, againſt all oppoſition. The real convert, we apprehend, will unreſervedly take ſhame to himſelf; and, though others may be partners in his guilt, he will be more likely to account himſelf chief in the tranſgreſſion, than to caſt the blame upon them: whilſt the diſſembler will catch at every appearance of an excuſe, to palliate his offence.

It is evident alſo, from the very confeſſions of Saul, that he was not convinced of the heinouſneſs of his ſin. He dreaded the conſequences of Samuel's diſpleaſure, and to Him, therefore, he made his application for pardon, being moſt ſolicitous to regain his favour.—Ah! what will it avail us, to obtain forgiveneſs from our fellow creatures? Let us ſeriouſly conſider, of how great magnitude is our wickedneſs in the ſight of a holy God! A proper ſenſe of this will ſwallow up every other thought, and conſtrain us to cry out, with David, " Againſt Thee, Thee only, have I ſinned*."

The prophet was departing from him in diſguſt, and with heavy denunciations; when the king, neither humbling himſelf before God, nor willing to be diſgraced before his ſubjects, laid hold on him, and ear-

* Pſal. li. 4.

neſtly

nestly intreated him to stay with him awhile, and pay him some public respect. "I have sinned," said he, "yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord thy God." This was very gross indeed; it shewed, that he chiefly desired to preserve appearances with men, and was most of all distressed, because his reputation would suffer, and perhaps a defection take place in his kingdom. Was this any mark of true repentance, or even consistent with it? Yet how many are there of a like description, who flatter themselves that they are converted to God, whilst their main concern is, to obtain some tokens of favour from pious ministers, or other excellent persons, in order that they may be thought well of in the world! This, at least, is the language of their hearts, "Honour me now," as if the good opinion of men would satisfy them. But where there is such a solicitude to maintain a character, we apprehend that the odiousness of sin is not rightly understood, and that there is no real humiliation on account of it.

Saul indeed, immediately afterwards, and in the presence of Samuel, "worshipped the Lord;" but, it should seem, this was done, merely in pretence, and to keep his credit. In the very same manner, the external rites and duties of religion are scrupulously observed and constantly practised by some, who dislike the whole business. Let us beware, lest our devotion be of this sort: for it is most base to worship the Lord, through a regard to our own reputation.

What

What wonder was it, then, that the Lord rejected Him, whoſe beſt ſervice was an act of vile diſſimulation? We read not, that he was ever humbled for his offence. Though he was ſpared for a long time after this tranſaction, the goodneſs of God did not lead him to repentance; for he continued, to the laſt, proud, and cruel, and profane. "And the Lord repented, that he had made Saul king over Iſrael." There was not, there could not be, any alteration in the counſels of God, or in the ſyſtem of His government. He foreſaw what Saul would be, and knew, that by his diſobedience and hypocriſy he would bring down the heavieſt judgments upon himſelf and his people. But from this period of the hiſtory, as Saul's inſincerity was now manifeſted, the divine conduct towards him was evidently changed; ſo that, ſpeaking after the manner of men, it ſeemed as if God repented of the favours beſtowed upon him.

The caſe is moſt awful; but it may be improved to ſome uſeful purpoſes.

1. Let all examine their own ſtate and character. If we profeſs to ſerve the Lord, let us be afraid of coming ſhort of real religion; for we have ſeen, that a partial obedience will not ſuffice. Let us enquire, then, Do we deſire to do the WHOLE Will of God? Is there no convenient ſin, no favourite luſt, that we ſpare? Are we truly humbled for our guilt, and willing to take ſhame to ourſelves before God and man, without ſeeking, or reſting on, any frivolous excuſes?

2. Let the ſincere penitent be comforted. Many, whoſe hearts are upright with God, are ſo oppreſſed with

with a ſenſe of their iniquities, eſpecially of ſuch as have been committed after hopeful appearances and profeſſions of piety, that they fear the hiſtory of Saul is a picture of themſelves. A concluſion this, moſt painful indeed! But to you, who hate every evil way, we can adminiſter conſolation. The very diſtreſs you feel is a favourable ſign; a proof, that you are not rejected of God; for to Him you muſt aſcribe your abhorrence of ſin, and your earneſt deſire to be renewed in holineſs. Saul's caſe, then, is not your's. You have thoſe diſpoſitions of mind, which are an evidence of grace, and which he had not. O give thanks; and "hold faſt that which you have received."

3. Let hypocrites be alarmed, and perſuaded to turn unto God, not in form and appearance only, but with unfeigned ſincerity. For what will avail their boaſted duties, and all their ſpecious pretences, to devotion? The Lord, who ſearches the heart, deteſts their loud profeſſions of love to Him, and will ſoon expoſe the baſeneſs of their characters. O think, then, How ſhall you ſtand in the Judgment before Him! Be ſolicitous, not merely to avoid diſgrace in this world, but to eſcape that ſhame and everlaſting contempt, which will be the portion of deceivers.

SAUL.

SAUL.

SECT. 2.

Saul, troubled by an evil spirit—preferred David—incensed at his popularity—afraid of him—married his daughter to him—frustrated in frequent attempts to kill him—continued to persecute him, though twice, being spared by David, he relented—terrified by the Philistines, consulted a witch—confounded by Samuel's appearance—overcome in battle—destroyed himself.

WHATEVER sanguine hopes we had entertained, upon our first view of the character of Saul, if we advert to the circumstances which we last considered, we shall expect nothing from the sequel of his history, to yield us any pleasure. We left him in a most awful situation; though a king upon his throne, an object of commiseration, rather than of envy. He had transgressed the command, and incurred the wrath of God; yet he was not humbled for his sin, nor did he seek reconciliation. Samuel, the prophet of the Lord, his faithful friend and counsellor, had forsaken him, to return no more; after pronouncing the solemn denunciation against him, that his kingdom would soon be taken from him and given to another. Shall we wonder, then, to hear, that " the Spirit of the Lord departed

departed from Saul, and an evil ſpirit from the Lord troubled him * ?"

The declaration, indeed, may excite an alarm. It may be ſaid, "Will the Lord finally abandon thoſe, with whom he has been pleaſed to fix his abode? Where is our boaſted ſecurity in the Covenant of grace, if they, who are partakers of the divine favour, may at laſt be caſt off, and delivered up to Satan?" But the caſe before us will not warrant ſuch a concluſion as this, which would be as diſhonourable to God, as diſtreſſing to his people. He promiſes, "I will make an everlaſting Covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good: but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they ſhall not depart from me †."

With Saul, "the latter end was worſe than the beginning;" but, through his whole life, he had never been brought under the influence of true religion. The Spirit of God, we have obſerved, was beſtowed upon him, not to ſanctify his heart, but to qualify him for the office of a king, to make him a wiſe governor, an active, prudent, and valiant commander. Thus alſo the Spirit of the Lord came upon thoſe, who were called "The Judges," to endue them with ſuitable abilities for their particular department, and to inſpire them with courage and zeal for the defence or deliverance of the Iſraelites. This Spirit departed from Saul; ſo that he no longer poſſeſſed the ſame diſtinguiſhed talents, as a Stateſman or a General, but loſt his former diſcernment, fortitude, and vigour.——We are

* 1 Sam. xvi. 14. † Jer. xxxii. 40.

continually

continually dependent upon the God of heaven, for the exertion of every faculty. If He with-draw his aſſiſtance, we are inſtantly unfitted for the duties of life.

"And an evil ſpirit from the Lord troubled him." The Lord, in righteous judgment deſerting him, ſuffered him to be expoſed to the ſnares, and carried away by the influence, of a wicked ſpirit. Alas! when God quits his reſidence in the human heart, all good is removed, and the door is opened for the admiſſion of every evil. If left to ourſelves, we ſhould immediately proceed from one iniquity to another. A foreign enemy, likewiſe, is ready to take the advantage, even "the adverſary," whoſe employment it is to "deceive the nations," and who "walketh about, ſeeking whom he may devour." We do not wonder, then, that, when the Spirit of the Lord departs, an evil ſpirit enters in. But the Devil is under control, nor can he exerciſe any power, or ſuggeſt any temptation, farther than the Lord permits. We are accordingly taught to aſcribe to the divine permiſſion the aſcendency of Satan over Saul *.

This by no means implies, that God is the author of any moral evil: but, in order to manifeſt his abhorrence of ſin, He is pleaſed to with-hold the benefits of his protection from perverſe and obſtinate offenders, and, for their contempt of his word and commandment, to remove from them that influence, whereby they had been reſtrained and aſſiſted. Shall we complain, that "His Spirit will not always ſtrive with

* See alſo 1 Kings, xxii. 22. Job, ii. 6.

man?" Is it not a righteous thing in Him to withdraw his preſence, after repeated inſults and provocations?

Let us attend, then, to the ſequel of Saul's hiſtory, which exhibits a diſmal picture indeed. We ſhall find him, from this period even to the cloſe of his life, dejected, timorous, given up to all vile affections, envy, deceit, hatred, malice, cruelty, and murder.

He was ſeized, it ſhould ſeem, with a deep melancholy, which oppreſſed him, at leaſt by intervals, and from which he ſought relief by the help of muſic. The harp and the company of David, who was ſent for to Court on this occaſion, alleviated the king's diſtreſs for a ſhort ſeaſon. While David "took his harp, and played with his hand, Saul was refreſhed, and was well, and the evil ſpirit departed from him." We read not, that he ever applied unto God for peace, or deſired His return.—And alas! how many under the ſevereſt wretchedneſs of mind, do in like manner "reſtrain prayer!" They are unwilling to attend to any religious convictions, and therefore, by various contrivances, endeavour to ſtifle the reproaches of conſcience. For a while, perhaps, the giddy pleaſures of the world may diſpel their gloom, and divert their thoughts. But real and laſting comfort cannot poſſibly be obtained by men, who keep at a diſtance from God, or refuſe to come, as the Goſpel preſcribes, to "the blood of ſprinkling."

Years before Chriſt, about 1063. The unhappy prince, forſaken of his defence, trembled at the approach of his enemies. He had collected a numerous army to oppoſe his

his inſulting neighbours; but, when Goliath appeared with his proud and impious challenge, Saul was diſmayed, and the people alſo, probably through their leader's timidity, were diſheartened*.—Even a natural ſtrength of mind is the gift of God: and the ſureſt method to poſſeſs a firm and unſhaken fortitude, is, to ſeek reconciliation with Him, and a ſenſe of His favour. What have they to fear, who can ſing, "The Lord of hoſts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge?"

Deliverance, indeed, was wrought for Iſrael, but with no credit to their king. David went forth with more than human courage, and, by the help of his God, ſlew the contemptuous foe. The victory, which was ſignal and important, paved the way for David's advancement. Saul, being for a time much attached to him, appointed him to a place of honour. But ſoon afterward, his warmeſt reſentment was excited, by the public acclamations of the people in praiſe of David. For, while they ſang, "Saul has ſlain his thouſands, and David his ten thouſands," he was jealous of the young man's ſuperior glory, and began to apprehend the loſs of his kingdom. "He eyed David from that day and forward†."—How terrible are the effects of envy! Its eyes are ever wandering abroad, to ſeek cauſes of diſtreſs to itſelf, in the excellence or happineſs of others. Thoſe, therefore, who are under its influence, are rendered extremely wretched by every pleaſing object around them, and are generally hurried by it to the baſeſt ſchemes of iniquity. O let us be-

* 1 Sam. xvii. 1, &c. † xviii. 6, &c.

ware, left, by the indulgence of this paſſion, we "give place to the Devil!" For no ſooner is envy cheriſhed in the heart, than a free admiſſion is granted to the vileſt affections.

To the gratification of this malignant diſpoſition in Saul, we aſcribe the ſucceeding enormities of his conduct. The Lord in judgment permitted Satan to return, and to gain a ſtill greater aſcendency over him: in conſequence of which, the king commenced a furious perſecutor, and entertained deſigns of murder. Twice together his intentions of killing David were fruſtrated. Yet he repented not: but, perceiving the awful change, which had taken place in himſelf, and the divine bleſſing upon David, he was afraid of the harmleſs youth, and could not bear him in his ſight.—There is ſomething in the preſence of an eminently good man, which will often ſtrike a terror into thoſe of an oppoſite character. Are not you, who hate the company of truly religious perſons, ſecretly afraid of them, becauſe you know that the Lord is with them, and that you yourſelves poſſeſs not the ſame exalted privilege? You then, who fear God, ſhould learn to maintain a holy confidence and courage: for "greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world *." Your very enemies, in the midſt of all their malevolent machinations againſt you, are conſtrained to ſtand in awe of you.

Men of bad deſigns are generally reduced to the meaneſt as well as baſeſt artifices, for the accompliſhment of their purpoſes; and yet, notwithſtanding all

* 1 John, iv. 4.

their cunning and malice, they are often wonderfully disconcerted and baffled in their schemes. Saul, who pretended a favour to David, was seeking his destruction. To remove him out of his sight, he preferred him to a higher post in the army. But this disturbed him the more, as it increased the popularity of David. The envious prince, therefore, proposed to give his eldest daughter in marriage to the very person, whom he suspected and dreaded as a rival. The offer proceeded not from friendship, but extreme malignity. For a condition was imposed, that David should undertake an expedition against the Philistines; and a hope was entertained, that he would fall by the enemy's hand. The king was disappointed, and then he departed from his promise: but another and a similar project was tried, from the same malicious principles. Though the eldest daughter was with-held, her younger sister was engaged and actually married to David; for which it was required only, that he should once more attack the Philistines, and slay a hundred of them. It was expected, that the attempt would prove fatal to him: but here again, the plans of the treacherous prince were defeated, and his confusion and hatred thereby increased. "He was the more afraid of David, and became his enemy continually." He avowed the malignity of his heart, and charged both his son Jonathan and all his servants to kill David *.

Yet, though the king of Israel's disposition was most detestable, there were intervals, in which we might have conceived some favourable hopes of him.

* 1 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

Upon his ſon's remonſtrance, his reſentment ſeemed to ſubſide, and he ſolemnly ſware, that David ſhould not die. Accordingly, a reconciliation took place, and David was admitted into his preſence, as in times paſt.——But it is not enough, that good reſolutions are formed, or even adhered to for a ſhort ſeaſon. There are few perſons, however confirmed in wickedneſs, who do not ſometimes relent, and who are not conſtrained, on ſome occaſions or other, to make the ſtrongeſt proteſtations of amendment, and really perhaps, for a while, to reform their conduct.

The ſequel will prove, that Saul's inward diſpoſition remained the ſame. His cruelty and rage very ſoon broke forth again, on account of David's repeated victories; and he attempted to murder him, inſtead of honouring and rewarding him for his faithful ſervices. The javelin was caſt, but it miſſed its aim. He was prevented alſo, by his own daughter's artifice, from aſſaſſinating David in private; and when, with the ſame bloody deſigns, he ſent three different companies to apprehend him, and at laſt himſelf purſued him even to Ramah, he was baffled in his purpoſe by a miraculous interpoſition. The Spirit of God came upon Him, as well as upon his meſſengers, and conſtrained them all, in a ſupernatural ecſtaſy, to propheſy, and to depart without the power of doing any harm.——The moſt violent perſecutors, we obſerve, are at the Lord's diſpoſal, who can repreſs their fury, and defeat their ſchemes, when and how He pleaſes.

When the reſtraint was taken off, the pride and cruelty of Saul appeared with as much ſtrength as be-

fore.

ſore. He diſcovered, or ſuſpected, that Jonathan was in David's intereſt, and thereby was provoked, with the groſſeſt reproaches to vilify the character, and with his own hand to ſtrike at the life, of his amiable and pious ſon*. In the ſame outrageous ſpirit, he complained that all his attendants were in league againſt him to dethrone him, and commanded that eighty-five prieſts ſhould be ſlain, and their city utterly deſolated, for ſhewing kindneſs to David†. The king was purſuing the object of his reſentment to Keilah, but was again diſappointed‡. Yet he continued daily to ſeek his deſtruction, which was prevented only by the gracious interpoſitions of God. On one occaſion particularly, when, after ſome fruitleſs attempts, Saul ſeemed on the very point of obtaining his wiſhes, and had almoſt ſurrounded David and his company, he was inſtantly called off by a ſudden invaſion of the Philiſtines, and obliged to give up his prey.—Alas! how reſtleſs are ſinners, who are enſlaved with the vile affections of envy, jealouſy, and malice! How unwilling to renounce their baſe projects, though repeatedly baffled! And yet, they are not only enemies to all around them, and can have no confidence in any, but they are, and muſt be, inconceivably wretched in themſelves.

There was nothing in David's conduct, to juſtify this injurious treatment. He diſcovered the utmoſt ſubmiſſion, fidelity and attachment to his prince; on which account the hatred and violence, he met with, were the more deteſtable. Even Saul himſelf was

* 1 Sam. xx. 30, &c. † xxii. 6, &c. ‡ xxiii. 7, &c.

forced to confefs it. No fooner was he delivered from the Philiftines, than he returned to his former purfuit "like as a lion that is greedy of his prey." With a numerous and well-chofen army, he followed the fon of Jeffe*: and by a very fingular providence, while he retired into a cave for fleep, he fell into the hands of the man, whofe life he was feeking. David however, with an aftonifhing lenity and forbearance, fpared and protected him, and meekly expoftulated with him on the injuftice and finfulnefs of his perfecution. Saul, being inftantly convicted, and melted down, with tears acknowledged his own iniquity. He teftified alfo the integrity of David, profeffed to pray that God would reward him for his kindnefs, and, in the firm expectation of his being raifed to the throne, intreated him not to cut off his feed, or deftroy his name.——This might feem, at firft view, the fentiment of penitence; but alas! the impreffion was momentary, produced perhaps by a fudden alarm of confcience, without any humiliation before God, or any defire to be reconciled to Him. Many, of moft profligate characters, are at times conftrained to allow and lament their folly, and to exprefs their efteem for thofe excellent perfons, whom they have hated and oppofed, and whom they ftill continue to perfecute.

The king of Ifrael had fhewn fome hopeful appearances, and had really defifted from his murderous purfuit of David. But the fame malignant temper remained within, though it had been reftrained for a feafon; and, upon the firft temptation, it broke forth

* 1 Sam. xxiv. 1, &c.

with

with its former violence. The Ziphites propofed to affift him in the difcovery of his enemy; and immedi-diately his paffions were roufed, and his foldiers were called out to hunt after the life of David, as before*. Some very proper feelings, indeed, feemed to be awakened in him, by the fingular forbearance of that eminent faint, who with full power in his hands, a fecond time, refufed to take revenge. The infatuated king again confeffed and deplored his folly and his guilt, intreated David to return to him as his fon, and vowed that he would no longer entertain any malevolent defigns againft him. He was conftrained alfo to pronounce a bleffing upon him, and to foretel his future advancement and profperity, though he had intended to deftroy him.—At laft, then, he ceafed from his mad purfuit: but, notwithftanding fuch ftrong convictions of his fin, and profeffions of amendment, he cried not to God for mercy; nor will the fequel exhibit any figns of penitence in him.

Some fuch hopeful appearances may often be found in men, who are obftinately enflaved to the moft vitious affections. Like Saul, they may at times acknowledge, "I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly," and yet continue in the fame abfurd and deftructive courfes. A fenfe of their guilt and danger may force itfelf upon them,, and excite great horrors in their confcience, though they refufe to renounce their evil practices. Upon the admonition of a friend under a ferious fermon, or in the diftrefs of fome afflictive providence, they may perhaps tremble at

* 1 Sam. xxvi. 1, &c.

themfelves,

themſelves, and ſeem to form the ſtrongeſt purpoſes of amendment. But the very next temptation baffles their reſolutions, and diſconcerts all their plans of becoming religious. They return, "as a dog to his vomit," and, like Pharaoh, they harden their hearts ſtill more. Ah! what avails ſuch repentance as this? What is it, but to inſult God? No wonder, that men in ſuch a ſtate are "given over to a reprobate mind, to do thoſe things which are not convenient," and "bring upon themſelves ſwift deſtruction."

David, we are told, experienced no more of Saul's perſecuting rage*; but we apprehend, that he owed his ſecurity to his flight, and not to any change of diſpoſition in the prince. Why elſe was he not admitted into favour at Court? or, why ſhould he ſtill continue in dread of falling by the hand of violence? The very tremendous cloſe of the wretched life, we are conſidering, will fully prove, that he, who had "made ſo fair a ſhew in the fleſh," remained impenitent to the laſt.

Years before Chriſt, about 1056. Under the alarms of an evil conſcience, Saul had loſt his former activity and courage, and probably foreboded his own approaching ruin. Upon an invaſion of the Philiſtines, he was utterly diſmayed; and, though he prepared for war, the ſight of his enemies filled him with confuſion†. In this diſtreſs, indeed, he conſulted the Lord, but received no anſwer. Shall we wonder at this? He had filled up the meaſure of his iniquity, and the time of judgment was come. We are therefore ad-

* 1 Sam. xxvii. 4. † xxviii. 4, &c.

moniſhed,

monifhed, to "feek the Lord, while he may be found, to call upon him, while he is near." But if finners harden their hearts againft all his gracious offers and invitations, is He bound by any promife in his word, or by any attribute of his nature, to liften to their cry, when nothing but their fuffering, or the dread of impending deftruction, drives them to Him; and when they are howling for deliverance from mifery, not feeking reconciliation with Him? Had Saul enquired of the Lord before, in fincerity and with real humiliation, he would not have been brought into that trouble; at leaft, he would not have been deferted in the hour of his diftrefs. Or, had he even then turned to the Lord, with an entire renunciation of his fin, and as a true penitent implored forgivenefs, the iffue would have been favourable. But thus faith the Lord, "Thefe men have fet up their idols in their heart, and put the ftumbling block of their iniquity before their face: fhould I be enquired of at all by them?"—"To what purpofe is the multitude of your facrifices unto me? When ye fpread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood *."

O how unfpeakably bleffed are they, who have found the way of accefs to God by Jefus Chrift, and can look up with confidence to Him, as engaged by his own Covenant to order their affairs for them, to preferve and to fave them! Their deepeft afflictions cannot feparate them from His love; nor will He hide his face from them, when they "pour out their complaints

* Ezek. xiv. 3. Ifa. i. 11——15.

before

before him, and ſhew him of their trouble."—Nor ſhould any real penitents be diſcouraged by the caſe of Saul. He was not humbled: he did not cry for mercy. If you, then, who have long maintained an oppoſition to God, are convicted of your guilt, and with a contrite ſpirit are ſupplicating pardon and peace; if you feel your ſins as a heavier burden than your moſt painful ſufferings, you ſhall obtain your deſire. Though Saul was rejected in righteous judgment, through the grace of Jeſus you ſhall be received to favour.

Whither, then, did the wretched king betake himſelf? Alas! how infatuated are the counſels of impenitent ſinners! As if in contempt or defiance of God, who had refuſed to anſwer him, he made application to a ſorcereſs, and thus ſeemed to expect that direction and aſſiſtance from the Devil, which had been denied him from Heaven. In his better days he had endeavoured to aboliſh witchcraft out of the land, as the divine law required; but now he began to "build again the things which he had deſtroyed," and with a daring profaneneſs pledged himſelf by his oath, that no puniſhment ſhould be inflicted on the witch, whom he conſulted.—We enquire not, by what method ſhe practiſed her impious art, or held communications with Satan. Suffice it to ſay, that ſuch an intercourſe has been maintained, and that, in theſe as well as other works of darkneſs, it is deſirable to be ignorant. We may be confident, that any attempt of this nature to gain information or aſſiſtance, either by real or pretended enchantment, is an avowed rejection of God, which muſt be highly offenſive to Him, and the

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iſſue of which muſt be ruinous and fatal in the extreme.

Both Saul and the ſorcereſs were confounded. He had expreſſed a wiſh to have an interview with Samuel the departed prophet, recollecting probably the benefit of his former counſels, and ignorantly ſuppoſing, that this wicked woman could bring back his ſpirit at her will. She alſo, it ſhould ſeem, expected by ſome device or impoſition of the Devil, to produce an apparition in the reſemblance of Samuel. But it pleaſed the Lord God himſelf to interpoſe, and to ſend the true Samuel, in order to confirm the ſentence, which he had before paſſed upon Saul, and to declare the divine determination to cut off that proud and impenitent offender the very next day. The prophet, then, ſolemnly reproved him for the fooliſh and preſumptuous imagination, he had entertained, of receiving conſolation from the creature, when he was forſaken of the Lord, and, in the name of the great Judge, pronounced upon him the irreverſible condemnation *.

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* It has been ſuppoſed, that the perſon who appeared to Saul was Satan himſelf, or ſome evil ſpirit, aſſuming the character of Samuel. But we have no right to conclude from the words of the ſacred hiſtory, that it was any other than the very prophet, whoſe name is mentioned. The ſolemn addreſs, here made to Saul, was ſuch as ſuited the meſſenger of the Lord, in his life-time neglected and deſpiſed by the king, and now commiſſioned to ratify his former declarations.——But it is objected, that it were abſurd and impious to imagine, a wicked woman could have power to ſummon a departed ſaint, by the profane arts of divination. This is readily granted; and we contend, that the appearance was not effected by the influence of the witch, and that it was altogether different to what

The king heard his awful doom, and yet, "after his hardnefs and impenitent heart," he did not bend the knee, or put up one petition for mercy. He felt an alarm and fainted, under the apprehenfion of his approaching deftruction: nor can we conceive any thing more wretched upon earth, than his condition upon Samuel's departure. The witch endeavoured to adminifter fupport: a miferable comforter indeed! He revived; but he repented not: and nothing then remained for him, but the "certain and fearful looking for of judgment." He prepared to meet the Philiftines, and, with all the madnefs of defperation, rufhed "as the horfe into the battle."

The event was anfwerable to the prediction. The Philiftines prevailed againft him: his army was utterly routed; his fons were flain; and he himfelf was forely wounded *. Yet, even in that awful fituation, he

what fhe had expected and defired; for fhe was much terrified by it. But we fee no inconfiftency in allowing, that God himfelf interpofed, at the very time that Satan was confulted, and fent his fervant to declare the doom of an obdurate finner. In the fame manner, the forceries of Balak, the king of Moab, were over-ruled by a divine impulfe upon the mind of Balaam, who was conftrained to pronounce a fentence, quite oppofite to his own wifhes, and to thofe of the prince who had employed him: Num. xxiii. Thus alfo, when Ahaziah, under a dangerous difeafe, had difpatched his meffengers to afk information of Baal-zebub as to the event, hoping doubtlefs for a favourable anfwer, the Lord God, to manifeft His abhorrence of the wicked enterprife, commanded Elijah to meet them by the way, and to affure them from Him, that the king fhould certainly die: 2 Kings, 1. See *Letters on Infidelity*, page 242, &c.

* 1 Sam. xxxi. 1, &c.

he expreſſed no ſigns of contrition, no concern for his immortal ſoul; but his chief apprehenſion was, leſt he ſhould ſuffer ſome indignities from the uncircumciſed Philiſtines. In order, therefore, to avoid a diſgraceful treatment from the hands of men, he requeſted his armour-bearer to deſtroy him; and, upon his refuſal, in the violence of pride and deſpair he fell upon his own ſword, and thus became his own executioner.

We wonder not at any the moſt execrable wickedneſs, which one, given up to final impenitence, may perpetrate. "Lord, what is man!" What enormities is he capable of committing! From the examples of ſome obdurate ſinners we perceive, what we ourſelves might have been, or what we may ſtill be, if the grace of God prevent not. Let us learn, then, under a ſenſe of our entire depravity, to pray, "Hold thou me up, and I ſhall be ſafe: and I will have reſpect unto thy ſtatutes continually."

We have ſeen Saul declining from very promiſing appearances of religion, and advancing from one degree of impiety to another, till at laſt he ſcrupled not to conſult the Devil himſelf, and then periſhed miſerably by his own hand. In the different ages of the world, it has pleaſed God to ſuffer ſome ſuch tremendous inſtances, as this before us, that others may be inſtructed and warned by them. Let us, then, beware of formality and hypocriſy. If the heart be not upright, whatever favourable beginnings there may be, there cannot be an uniform perſeverance in goodneſs, or any happy concluſion. Let us fear to depart from the clear line

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of duty in any the minuteſt circumſtance; for many have fallen by little and little. It will, therefore, be of the firſt importance, to cheriſh every holy deſire and reſolution, and to revere the dictates of conſcience. If that ſolemn monitor be ſlighted, if the Spirit of God be reſiſted, by a continued courſe of diſobedience, the conſequences muſt be terrible. But let not thoſe conſequences be laid to the charge of our gracious God. For none are given up to blindneſs and obduracy, as Saul was, but thoſe, who have abuſed their privileges, ſtifled their convictions, and violated their own expreſs engagements. Nor ſhould any perſons, however heinous or complicated their guilt has been, ſuppoſe that they are in Saul's abandoned ſtate, ſo long as they are deſirous to ſerve God in newneſs of life. We aſk, Is your ſin your burden? And is it your prayer, that you may be entirely conformed to the image of God? Then He is with you: and, while you devote yourſelves to Him in his Covenant, He ſays, "I will never leave thee, nor forſake thee."

It might ſeem ſurpriſing, if we were not habituated to the obſervation, that the example of Saul, in deſtroying himſelf, is defended, applauded, and imitated. The king of Iſrael ſought to hide himſelf from ſhame and captivity: and is it not almoſt faſhionable among ourſelves for men, who are in perplexity and diſtreſs, to ſeek relief in ſuicide? A miſerable refuge indeed! Becauſe our circumſtances are reduced, our friends deſert us, or our characters become infamous, ſhall we preſumptuouſly ruſh into the preſence of our Judge by an act of the higheſt rebellion, and thus conſign our ſouls to eternal perdition? What madneſs can

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be compared to this?—We pronounce not upon the caſe of thoſe, who by misfortune, temptation, or diſeaſe, are deprived of underſtanding. But where ſelf-murder is committed, as we fear it is in numerous inſtances, deliberately and with the poſſeſſion of reaſon, there is not the leaſt ground to expect forgiveneſs, ſince it is an offence, for which there can be no repentance. It is, alſo, an aggravation of this ſin, that the ſelf-deſtroyer not only plunges himſelf into endleſs wretchedneſs, but involves many ſurviving friends and relations, who have deſerved no ſuch treatment from him, in the deepeſt affliction.

May we, therefore, be prepared for the hour of trial! As it is the grand artifice of the Devil, to perſuade ſinners under extreme difficulties, to fly to this laſt act of deſperation, it may be of uſe to fortify the mind againſt it, by a ſerious conſideration of it's heinouſneſs before God, and even of its miſerable conſequences in ſociety. But our ſecurity is not in ourſelves. Let us ſeek protection from Him, "who keepeth Iſrael." Let us watch and pray; and "take unto us the whole armour of God, that we may be able to withſtand in the evil day, and having done all to ſtand." Amen.

DAVID.

CHAP. IV.

SECT. I.

David, of a low extraction—appointed to the throne—called to court—conquered Goliath—preferred, but soon persecuted, by the king—married Michal—prudent and beloved—protected from Saul's violence—fled for his life—called on Abimeleck—took refuge with the Philistines—removed to Judah—wandered under the care of Heaven—rescued from Saul by an invasion of the Philistines.

SCARCELY any part of divine revelation has escaped the malicious censures and profane scoffs of Infidels. They have racked their invention, and exerted all the poignancy of their wit, to discredit the sacred writings, by attempting to prove them false, or absurd, or contradictory. But we need not fear the event. "The words of the Lord are pure words;" and they will abide for ever, though sinners may impiously dare to deny or oppose them.

The character of David has been attacked with peculiar severity. Much pains have been taken, to give the most unfair representations of his conduct, in order to render his very name contemptible and odious. But the objections against David, it should seem,

ſeem, originate from a deſire to invalidate the Scriptures in general, and, if poſſible, to overturn the whole ſyſtem of Revelation. Feeble, however, are the ſtrongeſt aſſaults, againſt the bulwarks of the Almighty. "He that ſitteth in the heavens ſhall laugh: the Lord ſhall have them in deriſion."

Perhaps indeed, ſome zealous advocates for the Bible have not defended their cauſe in the moſt able and judicious manner, but, by their imprudence, may have given their adverſaries an advantage. There are thoſe, who juſtify the conduct of David, with ſuch a warmth of attachment, as unfits them for taking a fair eſtimate of his character; for they allow not any defect in it. A regard to truth muſt oblige us to confeſs, that there were, upon different occaſions, many things in his temper and behaviour, which we are at a loſs to account for, and ſome, which we muſt blame and condemn.

But does this conceſſion invalidate the Scriptures, or contradict any one doctrine of Revelation? Whatever David was, "the foundation of God ſtandeth ſure," and "the gates of hell ſhall not prevail againſt it." Even the deſcription of the very grievous offences, which ſaints of the firſt eminence have committed, and which unbelievers bring as an objection to the Bible, may be urged with great force in its defence. For hereby the ſacred writers have proved, that they had no private purpoſe to ſerve: they repreſented the truth as it was, confident that the cauſe of religion could ſuffer nothing by a faithful and ſimple relation of facts. Very unlike common hiſtorians, they have

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taken no pains to celebrate the excellence, or to conceal or extenuate the faults, of their favourite characters.

We need not fear, then, to give a plain and impartial account of the person before us; nor do we hesitate to assert, that his example claims our warmest esteem and admiration, and that, in the general tenour and principal circumstances of his life, he may properly be proposed as a distinguished pattern to all the Church of God. But "let no man glory in men:" none are found spotless, but He, who is emphatically called, "THE HOLY ONE OF GOD." Yet the very misconduct of those, who have made the highest attainments in religion, will furnish us with important and useful admonitions. Only for this purpose, we must lay aside a cavilling and licentious spirit, and be endued with an humble, obedient disposition.

David was placed in a very exalted situation; and he received a peculiar honour in being constituted, not merely the king of Israel, but also an illustrious prophet of God, a progenitor and type of the Saviour. The divine Providence raised him up in an extraordinary way, and for eminent services, took him from a state of obscurity, and fixed him in a post of supreme dignity. His father Jesse, we understand, possessed no considerable rank, and dwelt at Bethlehem, which was "little among the thousands of Judah." David was the youngest of the family, the most unlikely to be brought into public notice, and trained from his youth to the occupation of a shepherd. Yet from such a low condition he was elevated to the throne. The change appeared

appeared so astonishing, that it filled him with the most grateful admiration, even to the end of life.——It is agreeable to the general method of God's proceedings to work by means, which are thought weak and ineffectual. He puts contempt upon all human greatness; and, while He accomplishes the most important events by instruments utterly insignificant, He proves that "the excellency of the power" is all his own, and that "the help, which is done upon earth, He doeth it himself."

Years before Christ, 1064. When the Lord had declared his determination of rejecting Saul from the kingdom, He directed Samuel to provide a successor among the sons of Jesse*. It should seem, that David had been well nigh overlooked by the prophet, on account of his youth and absence from home. When he was sent for, indeed, his meek and beautiful appearance were enough to conciliate esteem: yet he obtained the appointment, not as having a fair countenance, but as being "the man after God's own heart." For immediately, on his coming before Samuel, the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." As an intimation, then, of God's infallible purpose to bring him to the throne, the consecrating oil was poured upon him, in the presence of his brethren; and probably, for some time, the circumstances were not known beyond the extent of that household.

God disposes of his favours in a sovereign manner, and sometimes very differently to our wishes and expectations. In many instances we have observed, that

* 1 Sam xvi. 1, &c.

He has chosen the younger, in preference to the elder branches of a family. He selects whom He will, for the advancement of his own glory, and is not accountable to us for any of his dispensations. We are ready to fix our regard on outward appearances; but we are admonished, as Samuel was, that "the Lord seeth not as man seeth;" and we ought to remember, that "He is the Judge: He putteth down one, and setteth up another."——He is pleased, however, to give a suitable degree of strength and wisdom to those, whom He calls to any difficult and important service. "The Spirit of the Lord came upon David, from that day forward," and qualified him with every necessary endowment for the high station, to which he was appointed. He was not, indeed, immediately set upon the throne, but gradually prepared for his exaltation by a long and painful course of discipline.

Very soon after he had been anointed by Samuel, a remarkable providence opened the way for his introduction at Court, where he might be instructed in the administration of public affairs. On account of Saul's dejected state, David, whose talents had begun to excite admiration, was recommended to his notice; and the music of his harp, accompanied probably with the divine psalms of this "sweet singer of Israel," composed the distracted mind, and alleviated the distress of the king. His abilities and amiable deportments conciliated Saul's esteem, and procured him distinguished marks of favour. And yet, for some time, he was not constantly resident in the palace; but, though honoured with the royal friendship, he did not disdain

his former humble employment. "He returned from Saul, to feed his father's ſheep at Bethlehem *." Nor ſhould we forget, that a diligent attention to the duties of our proper calling, of whatever kind they be, is indiſpenſably requiſite, and will be the beſt preparation for further advancement and uſefulneſs in life, if ſuch ſhould be deſigned for us. In that retired ſituation, David received intimations of future victories, while he was miraculouſly ſtrengthened to ſlay a lion and a bear, in the defence of his flock. This deliverance, we find, confirmed his dependence upon God, and emboldened him with the greater confidence to meet ſucceeding trials.

His faith and his courage were ſoon called forth, and diſplayed in a very glorious manner. How intereſting is the account of his combat with Goliath! Our attention therein is directed not merely to the pious ardour of David, but to that divine power, which was exerted by ſo feeble an inſtrument. Being ſent by his father to viſit his brethren in the field of battle, he arrived amongſt them at the very time that the proud Philiſtine was inſulting the armies of Iſrael, and filling them all with terror and diſmay. Immediately he felt a holy indignation, when he perceived the reproach caſt upon the people and upon the God of Iſrael by that vaunting enemy, and expreſſed a deſire to wipe away the diſgrace. But he received a ſevere check from his eldeſt brother, who, probably through envy, accuſed him of deſerting his proper employment, and aſcribed his zeal for God to "the pride and the

* 1 Sam. xvii. 15, &c.

naughtineſs of his heart."——Surely it becomes the friend of religion to be rouſed from his ſupineneſs, and to ſtand forth with a manly courage, in defence of the cauſe of God, when its adverſaries triumph. But let him not be ſurpriſed, or diſheartened, if the baſeſt principles be imputed to him, as they were to David, and eſpecially if his near relations frown upon him and oppoſe him. But let him learn from this pious youth, not to return "railing for railing." He replied only, with great gentleneſs of ſpirit, "What have I now done? Is there not a cauſe?" And in general it will be found, that "a mild anſwer turneth away wrath."

David was not afraid to avow his intentions before the king, but with much firmneſs he propoſed himſelf, as ready to meet the giant in ſingle combat. The offer was thought ridiculous: his age, his comparative weakneſs, and inexperience in war, were urged as ſtrong objections: but he over-ruled them all, by declaring his confidence in God, who had ſupported and preſerved him in former dangers. With what defence, then, ſhall he be provided for the fight? The armour of Saul was at firſt put upon him; but, being unaccuſtomed to ſuch a dreſs, he rejected it, and advanced into the field with no other weapons, than his ſtaff, and his ſling, and five ſmooth ſtones in his ſhepherd's bag. Thus the ſtrength of his faith, and the gracious interpoſition of God in his favour, more clearly appeared. The very weakneſs of thoſe inſtruments, which the Lord generally employs for any ſignal deliverance, diſplays and magnifies his own power, and abaſes the pride of man.

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The feeble combatant was disdained in the eyes of the haughty Philistine, who cursed him by his gods, and threatened to destroy him instantly. But David was not to be moved by the fierceness of his looks, or the terror of his menaces. He declared, that he stood forth in the present conflict, depending solely on the divine aid, and desirous to vindicate the injured honour of the God of Israel. He expressed also the firmest confidence, that, mean and contemptible as his own appearance might be, he should obtain the victory over the insulting champion and the numerous host of the Philistines, and that the God, in whom he trusted, would be known and glorified by the issue of the battle. Nor was this a vain boast: the contest was immediately decided in favour of the stripling, who with his sling and a stone brought down the mighty warrior to the ground, and thus procured a complete triumph to his country.

To what, then, shall we ascribe the bravery and the success of David? Not to the exertion of a mere natural temper, but to the influence of those divine principles, faith and zeal. The history is recorded for the instruction and encouragement of future ages, that all may be excited to lay themselves out for the honour of God, and the support of His cause, whatever dangers may threaten them, and that they may learn to face the most tremendous adversaries, with a bold and unshaken reliance on the promised help of God. There is one conflict, in which all the followers of the Lamb are, and must be, engaged: One enemy, more formidable than Goliath, challenges the armies

armies of Iſrael. But "reſiſt the Devil, and he will flee from you." Only go forth to the battle with the faith of David; and the powers of darkneſs ſhall not ſtand againſt you. But ah! how often have you been foiled, through "an evil heart of unbelief!"

So ſignal a victory could not but advance the reputation of David. The king himſelf became more attached to him, and from that time would not ſuffer him to return to his former occupation as a ſhepherd, but retained him at Court*. There alſo, it pleaſed God to raiſe him up a friend, who was deſigned to be a ſupport and comfort to him in his ſucceeding trials. Jonathan, the ſon and the preſumptive heir of Saul, diſcovered an affection for him, which was diſintereſted, ardent, and abiding; for "he loved him as his own ſoul." The conduct of David in that exalted ſtation was moſt amiable, and ſuch as recommended him to the eſteem both of the courtiers and of the people. For he was obedient and faithful to his prince, and manifeſted a ſingular prudence in every part of his deportment. How often do ſucceſs and preferment inebriate the mind, and cheriſh the vileſt principles! Very few are proof againſt the ſnares of greatneſs, eſpecially when elevated from a low condition.

But the moſt painful afflictions awaited him; and his honours were ſoon imbittered to him. Saul, who had, probably, taken him as his companion, perceived, as they went from place to place, his growing popularity, and heard the ſongs of the women celebrating his late conqueſt of Goliath. He conſidered himſelf, there-

* 1 Sam. xviii. 1, &c.

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fore, as finking into neglect and contempt, and looked upon his faithful fervant with an envious and malignant eye. This was the rife of that long and fevere perfe-cution, through which we are now to accompany the fon of Jeffe. And here we fhall obferve him as a man of forrows, yet the conftant object of the divine care. He was haraffed with extreme fufferings; but an invi-fible hand, powerful and irrefiftible, conducted him through them all. It was the purpofe of God to fet him on the throne, and nothing could prevent it. The very trials, he met with, were intended to prepare him for his future advancement, for which, probably, he would have been unfit at the firft. The Lord watched over him with a parental tendernefs, fought his battles for him, adminiftered ftrong confolation to him, and gave him a happy iffue out of all his afflictions. Is it not thus He deals with thofe, whom " He prepares unto glory?" Though He loves them moft affection-ately, He does not therefore exempt them from trou-ble, but rather calls them to it. Though " it is his good pleafure to give them the kingdom," He does not put them into immediate poffeffion, but leads them to it through much tribulation, and makes that very tribulation the means of fitting them for it. Let them not murmur at his gracious appointment, nor diftruft his care, but look forward, with joyful expec-tation, to the crown which is laid up for them.

For a long time David was kept in continual appre-henfion of falling by the murderous hand of the king. Twice together he narrowly efcaped the javelin, which was intended to fmite him. Yet he perfevered in the fame

ſame meek and reſpectful behaviour towards his perſecutor. He was removed from Court, under the pretext of being preferred; but in his new ſituation he acted with ſo much wiſdom, and diſcovered ſuch evident ſigns of being favoured with the divine preſence and bleſſing, that he gained the eſteem of the whole nation. This very circumſtance increaſed the enmity of Saul againſt him. He was then ſent to fight againſt the Philiſtines, that he might periſh in the battle; with a promiſe, indeed, of receiving the king's eldeſt daughter in marriage, if he ſhould prove victorious. But, upon his return, he met with the utmoſt contempt; for the princeſs was given to be the wife of another man.

A ſecond offer, of the ſame invidious kind, was made to David. Michal, Saul's youngeſt daughter, was propoſed and engaged to him, if he would undertake another expedition againſt the Philiſtines, and deſtroy a hundred of them. He complained not of his former injurious uſage; but, though he probably perceived the malicious purpoſe in the latter overture, he accepted it with a modeſt deference, and declined not the dangerous ſervice, on which he was deſired to go. He was ſucceſsful as before, and then, according to the compact, became the king's ſon-in-law. Yet, notwithſtanding this near affinity, Saul was not the leſs enraged againſt him. David, however, in theſe very difficult circumſtances continued to exerciſe a ſingular meekneſs of wiſdom in all his deportment, and was beloved and celebrated throughout the kingdom.

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How uncommon is ſuch prudence and diſcretion, eſpecially under inſults and provocations! Let us enquire, if we reſemble this part of the exemplary character before us. Are we "behaving ourſelves wiſely in all our ways?" Is there no ſinful omiſſion, no raſhneſs of ſpirit, no impropriety of conduct? We are forward, perhaps, to complain of our enemies; yet their oppoſition and perverſeneſs will not excuſe any wrong tempers in us, but ſhould rather increaſe our circumſpection, and diligent attention to the duties of our ſtation. We have ſeen, that "the Lord was with David;" and if WE alſo deſire the Lord's preſence, ſaying, as this holy man, "O when wilt thou come unto me?" we muſt likewiſe form the ſame reſolution, "I will walk within my houſe with a perfect heart*."

The moſt wiſe and upright deportment will not enſure a freedom from perſecution. Every ſervant of the palace received a charge from the king to kill David†, who was therefore obliged to hide himſelf, till the friendly offices of Jonathan appeaſed the anger of Saul againſt him for a ſeaſon, and reſtored him to his place. His freſh ſucceſſes againſt the Philiſtines rekindled the envious rage of Saul, and made his ſituation at court untenable. The javelin was again caſt at him, to deſtroy him, and he narrowly eſcaped to his own houſe. But even there, his life was aſſaulted; and he was preſerved, only by his wife's ſubtilty. She let him down through the window; and, from neceſſity, he became a wretched wanderer. For a time he found refuge with Samuel, to whom he communicated

* Pſal. ci. 2. † 1 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

his

his diſtreſs. But the fury of Saul purſued him thither alſo. One meſſenger after another was ſent to apprehend him; but, by a miraculous impreſſion upon their minds, they were rendered incapable of executing their purpoſe, and, as if they had forgotten their errand, they began to propheſy. The king himſelf followed them, probably with a determination to wreak his vengeance; but he alſo was "among the prophets," and thus afforded David the opportunity of eſcaping.—How aſtoniſhing is the providence of God! How various his ways of protecting his people! He can never be at a loſs to reſcue them from the deſigns of their enemies, even when their caſe appears moſt deſperate. Let them be encouraged to confide in Him, and to "caſt all their care upon Him, for He careth for them."

David had been wonderfully delivered at Naioth; but he ſtill conſidered himſelf in the moſt imminent danger. He fled to his beloved Jonathan, to repreſent his fears and diſtreſſes, and to conſult with him upon the proper means of ſafety*. He dared not venture into the royal preſence; and therefore it was concerted, that Jonathan ſhould make his apology for abſence, till the intentions of Saul were better underſtood. An affecting interview took place between theſe two friends, who bound themſelves to each other by the moſt ſolemn contract, to maintain their fidelity. It was not long before Jonathan was convinced of the continuance of his father's murderous deſigns; and then, according to the expedient agreed on, he conveyed the painful information to David. The poor

* 1 Sam. xx. 1, &c.

persecuted youth arose from the cave, in which he had been concealed, and, expressing his respect, his gratitude, and his love to Jonathan, in the most endearing manner, parted from him with extreme grief; and being about to fly, he knew not whither, he was commended by him to the care and protection of a faithful God.

It is, doubtless, every way right and proper to contrive for our safety in times of danger; and some circumstances may render it necessary for us to desert our place. In such cases, however, it should appear that our removal is indispensably requisite; and it should then be submitted to, as the appointment of God. But, perhaps, David felt more distressing apprehensions on this occasion, than became Him, to whom the promises were made. Doubtless, he upbraided himself for his unbelief, and often said, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?" Alas! how weak, and how frequently interrupted, is the exercise of faith, in the strongest believers! Let us watch and pray against every distrusting thought, and quietly leave ourselves in the Lord's hands.

The friendship of Jonathan, from whom the severest opposition might have been expected, afforded the most sensible relief to David in his sorrow. This was a gracious dispensation from the Lord; and in the very same way He is pleased to support his afflicted people, even now. Do we not recollect, that He has again and again raised up for us a counsellor, a patron, and a comforter, where we had every thing to fear? Has He not, by the unlooked for kindness of others, dried

up

up our tears, when we were overwhelmed with trouble; and pleaded our cause, when we were suffering under unjust reproaches and oppressions? Let us remember, and rejoice, that He has the hearts of all men in his hands.

David was an exile from Court, from his father's house, from his wife, and from his beloved Jonathan. A distressing situation truly! The trial was so great, that his faith failed him, and he was betrayed into some inconsistencies, over which we might desire to draw a vail.——In his flight, he called to take his leave of the tabernacle, and, as his manner was, to consult the Lord by Ahimelech the high priest*. There he was driven to a very sinful dissimulation and falshood, in order to avoid suspicions, and to obtain some means of support and defence from the minister of religion. The consequences of this misconduct were fatal to many; and David felt very strong compunction on account of it. Ah! how dangerous it is, in any circumstances, to deviate from the strictest integrity!

He received from the hands of Ahimelech a part of the holy bread (in taking which he was justified by his pressing necessity†) and the sword of Goliath, which had been laid up before the Lord, and which might strengthen his faith, by reminding him continually of the miraculous deliverance he had before experienced. With this slender sustenance, and with no other armour, he proceeded on his way; and, desiring only to secure himself, not to stir up a rebellion, he betook himself to the very enemies, whom he had often sub-

* 1 Sam. xxi. 1, &c. xxii. 15. † Matt. xii. 3, 4.

dued.

dued. The king of the Philistines was inclined to favour him; but, when his character was known, the fears and suspicions of the courtiers were excited; and it should seem, that he could not long have subsisted in that country. Perhaps he was wrong in attempting it; at least he certainly was so, in the very dishonourable e[illegible]ient, which he adopted for the preservation of [illegible]He feigned himself mad, that they might no[illegible]d any danger from him, and then was sen[illegible]s an useless or troublesome person.——We mourn for the distresses, in which this holy man was involved; or rather, we lament, that in his distresses he did not always stand upright. But, while we blame his distrust and timidity, we fear for ourselves, and pray, "that we enter not into temptation."

Banished from the Philistines, he was reduced to the necessity of hiding himself in a cave*. There he was joined by his parents and relations, who fled to him, either to comfort him, or to protect themselves. There also, a considerable company resorted to him: about four hundred men, of desperate fortunes, enlisted themselves under him, as their captain. Whatever might be their intentions, David made use of their assistance, not to annoy or injure others, but to defend himself; and wherever they encamped, they were a security to the inhabitants around them. In the midst of his distresses, we are pleased to observe his attention to his aged father and mother, and his anxious concern for their welfare. He took them to the king of Moab, and requested him to afford them a retreat,

* [illegible] Sam. xxii. 1, &c.

a retreat, expressing his patient submission to God, and dependence upon Him for better days. This is an instructive example. Those, who possess eminent abilities and distinguished piety, may be, for a time, cut off from all opportunities of public usefulness: and yet, under the heaviest calamities, they may be reserved for the most exalted honours to them[illegible], and beneficial purposes to others. Let us le[illegible]er, while we are solicitous for our own safet[illegible]-get, what we owe to our parents: and, [illegible]ur prospects be dark, let us remember the divine promises, and be willing to wait, as David, "till we know what God will do for us."

David, in his exile, was favoured with the company of the prophet Gad, and, doubtless, was directed and comforted by his counsels and prayers. According to the advice, then, which he received from that spiritual guide, he removed into the land of Judah, though with extreme danger, that he might testify his reliance upon the protection of the Lord, and not be seduced by the practices of idolaters, who were friendly to him. Soon after this removal, he was joined by Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, who related to him the horrid murder, which Saul had committed upon Ahimelech, the high-priest, and the other inferior ministers of religion. The account was most painful to David; for he knew and confessed, that his dissimulation had been the occasion of their death. From that time he retained Abiathar with him, giving him the strongest assurances of support, and pledging his own life for his security. The presence, the co[illegible]tion, and the services

vices of thoſe, " who miniſter about holy things," though generally diſregarded, will ever be conſidered as a valuable acquiſition by men of real piety: nor ſhould they think any hazard or loſs too great to be incurred, for the ſake of ſuch a privilege.

David was perſecuted on every ſide; but, far from betra[illegible]vindictive ſpirit, he was ready to do good to [illegible]er he might ſuffer for it. Notwithſtanding[illegible]e diſtreſſes, he diſcovered a generous atten[illegible]the public welfare; and, while bold and vigorous in action, he ſhewed at the ſame time a conſtant dependence upon God for direction and ſucceſs: an uncommon inſtance of martial courage and fervent devotion, united in the ſame perſon!

He was requeſted to defend the city of Keilah againſt the Philiſtines*. But, though willing to render his countrymen any ſervice, he would not undertake the enterpriſe, till he had firſt conſulted the Lord. The approbation of Heaven was declared; yet his own followers oppoſed the meaſure, till a more expreſs command, and promiſe of ſupport from God himſelf, encouraged them to go. He went therefore, and, by a ſignal victory, " ſaved the inhabitants of Keilah." But the very men, whom he had reſcued from deſtruction, were on the point of delivering him into the hands of Saul. This was a ſevere trial indeed! Here, however, as on other occaſions, he fled for refuge to his God; and, by His particular inſtruction, he forſook the town, and once more became a wanderer from place to place.—If religion have its proper

* [illegible]xxiii 1, &c.

influence upon us, it will teach us to commit our way unto the Lord, to conſult His will, and not to lean to our own underſtanding. Like David, we ſhall not be backward to obey the directions of our heavenly Guide, though the moſt formidable dangers threaten us. Nor ſhall we repent of doing good to any, even while we receive no other recompence than [illegible]d and cruelty.

David encamped in the wilderneſs, and [illegible]d by the murderous king of Iſrael through [illegible]oods and the mountains. From day to day it ſeemed as if he ſhould fall a prey to his enemy; but he remained ſecure, under the immediate care of Heaven: "God delivered him not into his hand." In that diſtreſſed ſituation he was viſited by Jonathan, his faithful friend, who, from religious principles, was firmly attached to him, and went, at the hazard of his own life, to "ſtrengthen his hand in God." The pious youth reminded him of the divine promiſes, and encouraged him to look for a happy iſſue. The interview was conducted with the ſolemnities of devotion, and tended, doubtleſs, to diſſipate the ſears of David, and to comfort him in his trouble.

Soon afterwards, his faith was again tried in a ſevere manner. Through the officious information of the Ziphites he was diſcovered to Saul; and, being overtaken by that furious adverſary, he was in the utmoſt danger of being ſurrounded and entirely cut off. An eſcape appeared impoſſible. But the eye of God watched over him, and, by His interpoſing providence, when all human ſuccour failed, the threatening

4 blow

blow was inſtantly averted. A ſudden invaſion of the Philiſtines called off the king to defend his country, and David was permitted to retire in ſafety.

Here we pauſe, and ſtand in admiration of the ways of God. We are ready to aſk, Why does He ſuffer thoſe, who are deareſt to himſelf, to be ſo evil-intreated? But we repreſs our preſumptuous enquiries. Suff[illegible]s, that "He will not forſake his people, for [illegible] name's ſake," and that, in ſpite of all opp[illegible] His gracious purpoſes concerning them ſhall be [illegible]ally accompliſhed. Have we not ſeen His hand guiding, ſupporting, and protecting the perſecuted ſon of Jeſſe? And have we not perceived, in many ſingular incidents throughout this part of the hiſtory, the divine power, love, and faithfulneſs diſplayed? Do we not alſo, upon the review of our own life, recollect various inſtances, in which the Lord has, almoſt viſibly, interpoſed, to adminiſter relief, and bring deliverance? Let not theſe remarkable events be aſcribed to chance; but, ſurveying what God hath wrought for us, let us devoutly ſay, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Nor let us be diſmayed at the proſpect of future difficulties, but ſtay ourſelves upon Him, "who is wonderful in counſel, and excellent in working." He can raiſe up for us, in the midſt of our enemies, "a friend that ſticketh cloſer than a brother," tender and conſtant as Jonathan. Sooner than his promiſe ſhall fail, He will commiſſion the Philiſtines to effect our eſcape, at the very moment when our caſe may appear moſt deſperate. Enough, at leaſt, we learn from the ſaints

of old, to encourage our hope in God, contrary to all human probabilities. Nature, indeed, is averſe, but faith will teach and enable us, to "hope againſt hope." And this entire dependence upon Him, is what God indiſpenſably requires; for He declares, "If ye will not believe, ſurely ye ſhall not be eſtabliſhed*."

* Iſa. vii. 9.

DAVID.

DAVID

SECT. 2.

Davi[illegible] Saul's life—provoked by Nabal—married [illegible]ared Saul a ſecond time—retired to the Phi-[illegible]ceived by Achiſh—diſmiſſed from his ſervice —[illegible]red by the Amalekites—recovered all from them —mourned for Saul and Jonathan—removed to Hebron, where he was acknowledged king.

THAT part of the life of David, which is now before us, exhibits to our view an inſtance of one, who was choſen of God, and appointed to an exalted ſtation, involved in the deepeſt diſtreſſes. Yet in him we behold "an example of ſuffering affliction and of patience." At times, indeed, he was caſt down through unbelief, as if the divine promiſe had come utterly to an end; but, upon the whole, he was enabled to maintain a firm dependence on the faithfulneſs of God, and to derive ſtrong conſolations from his religious principles. If we would know the particular ſtate of his mind, we muſt conſult his own declarations in the Pſalms, which were penned under the influence of the Holy Ghoſt at thoſe very ſeaſons, to which we allude. There we ſhall obſerve the moſt indubitable marks of eminent piety, a meek reſignation to the diſpenſations of Providence, a ſure truſt in the everlaſting Covenant, an unequalled fervour of devotion, and, on ſome

occaſions, ſuch a degree of joy in the Lord, as carried him above his fears and calamities. May we ſo ſtudy his character, that we may be partakers of the ſame ſpirit! Alas! are we not utterly deſtitute of theſe principles and affections? Where ſhall we diſcover the like ardour? Would not the moſt diſtant approach to it be cenſured, as the wildneſs of fanatics and enthu-ſiaſts? Men are aſhamed of any real ear[illegible] the ſervice of God, and not afraid to avow t[illegible]rd and contempt of every thing truly ſerio[illegible] are conſtrained to mourn for the open profaneneſs, which prevails among us; and not leſs ſo, for the indifference, formality, and hypocriſy of many, who profeſs godli-neſs, who "have a name that they live, and are dead."

Do we conſider the behaviour of David toward others? We ſhall find him poſſeſſed of the ſtricteſt integrity and the moſt amiable tempers, exerciſing not only patience and forbearance, but fidelity and kind-neſs, in return for the baſeſt perfidiouſneſs and cruelty. We do not, indeed, aſſert, that he betrayed no marks of imperfection; but we maintain, that his conduct, in the general tenour of it, will afford an inſtructive example to all.

Years before Chriſt, about 1061. He had retired, for his own ſecurity, to the rocks and wilderneſs of Engedi, whither he was ſoon purſued by the malice of the king*. In this ſituation, it pleaſed God to give him an opportu-nity of proving, that he was very far from cheriſhing any ſentiments of rebellion or revenge. For ſome ne-ceſſary purpoſe Saul betook himſelf, without an attend-

* 1 Sam. xxiv. 1, &c.

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ant, to the ſame cave, where David and his followers were concealed; and of conſequence the life of the prince lay entirely at the mercy of the man, whom he was ſeeking to murder. It was immediately urged upon David, that this was ſuch a convenient occaſion for deſtroying his enemy, as he ought not to neglect, being o[illegible]d him by the providence of God, and in perf[illegible]f the promiſe. How eaſily may we impo[illegible]urſelves, interpret events as providential, and [illegible] that God is favouring our ſchemes, when we are contriving to gratiſy our own corrupt affections! —But David was not ſo miſled. He could, in an inſtant, have vindicated his wrongs, and reſcued himſelf from the hands of an enraged perſecutor; but he choſe rather to refer the matter to the Lord, and to wait His time and way of deliverance. He knew, from the divine declarations, that he ſhould one day ſit upon the throne; but he would not take any indirect ſtep to place himſelf there. He rejected, then, with abhorrence, the propoſal of aſſaſſinating the prince, whom the Lord had anointed, nor would he ſuffer others to commit violence upon him.

Saul, therefore, was permitted to eſcape without injury. David, indeed, had cut off the ſkirt of his garment, as a proof that he had full power over him, and that he was not influenced by any vindictive tempers towards him: yet even for this trivial circumſtance he was afterward grieved, leſt it ſhould be conſtrued into irreverence and diſaffection. But as the king was departing, David cried after him, and, with all the tokens of reſpect, and with the ſtrongeſt declarations

clarations of fidelity and attachment to his ſervice, expoſtulated with him on the unreaſonableneſs, the cruelty, and ſinfulneſs of his conduct, aſſuring him, that he never could be induced by any conſiderations to lift up his hand againſt him, and yet reminding him, that the Lord would ſhortly interpoſe, and determine the conteſt between them.——So tende[illegible]ddreſs, ſo ſtriking an inſtance of forbearance a[illegible]oſity diſarmed the furious perſecutor of his [illegible]ted him down to tears, and conſtrained him t[illegible]e a ſupplicant to the very perſon, for whoſe blood he had been thirſting.

What aſtoniſhing effects are produced by meekneſs of ſpirit! Yet how rarely is ſuch an example to be met with! It ſhould ſeem, from the caſt of modern times, that the forgiveneſs of injuries is a mean and deſpicable thing. But how different is the judgment of God, who hath declared, "The diſcretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to paſs over a tranſgreſſion *!" The miniſters of Chriſt, therefore, in oppoſition to the faſhionable principles of honour, muſt call upon men "to forbear one another, and to forgive one another," to lay aſide their violent animoſities, and, without conſidering the inſults they have received, to unite in love and brotherly affection together.—It may not be improper to juſtify ourſelves, when miſrepreſented and abuſed; but even this ſhould be done in a peaceable and modeſt manner, as in the caſe before us. We ſhould be willing to leave the vindication of all our wrongs to God, and quietly await

* Prov. xix. 11.

his

his determination. Ah! how contrary is this to the impatient, ambitious, and vindictive desires of our hearts!

We have, also, cause to lament, that those, who are habitually meek and humble, are liable to be hurried away by temporary emotions of pride and anger. David had [illegible]rn fidelity to Saul, but could not trust the mo[illegible] assurances of that perfidious prince, and the[illegible] maintained the same prudent caution. He [illegible]ued to wander, as a poor distressed exile, from one cave and wilderness to another. In this situation he was reduced to the want of necessaries; and, being averse to any schemes of plunder for his support, he sent to a rich neighbour to intreat his kindness, at a time of festivity and mirth*. David, indeed, seemed to have some claim upon Nabal; for he had carefully protected his flocks and possessions from the injurious assaults of others. But his application was rejected, and both he and his followers were treated with the utmost contempt and reproach. Upon this occasion, David, who had been proof against the insults and cruelties of Saul, being betrayed into an angry, and revengeful spirit, both threatened and prepared to destroy the churl and every male in his family. We pretend not to justify so rash and barbarous a resolution; for we confess it to be highly disgraceful to David's character. But we maintain, that it was contrary to his general deportment; and, when by the prudence of Abigail his resentment was pacified, he

* 1 Sam. xxv. 2, &c.

himself

himſelf perceived and acknowledged the injuſtice and ſinfulneſs of his ſcheme, and praiſed God, that He had mercifully prevented him from executing his wicked purpoſe.

Alas! what continual need we have, to "watch and pray, leſt we enter into temptation!" Though we have been upheld in paſt dangers, this will [illegible] no ſecurity to us in future. We may have be[illegible]oved by very great provocations, and yet ſoon [illegible]me by a trifling affront, if we be off our guard. [illegible]l we not alſo, with David, admire and praiſe the over-ruling providence, and reſtraining grace of our God, who, though He has ſuffered us to proceed to the very point of committing ſome heinous iniquity, has interpoſed, moſt ſeaſonably, to hinder us from bringing guilt upon ourſelves, and miſchief upon others? Let us intreat Him, that He would "hedge up our way," rather than leave us to diſhonour his cauſe, and ruin our own ſouls.

Nabal was ſuddenly removed by the righteous judgment of God, and Abigail became the wife of David, who, probably, in the late inſtance, had been ſtruck with her ſenſe, her prudence, and her piety. This holy man, like many of the ancient ſaints, gave into the prevailing cuſtom of Polygamy. The practice, however, is not hereby juſtified: it was permitted for a time; but its conſequences have always been extremely pernicious, and it is now expreſsly prohibited by the higheſt authority*.

* Mark x. 11.

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On another occasion we behold him exercising the same lenity, and forbearance toward Saul, as he had done before. He was still hunted by the treacherous prince, and still he refused to adopt any other measures against him, than his own defence rendered absolutely needful. With an astonishing courage, or rather a peculiar degree of faith, he ventured, in the dead of night, [illegible] very spot, where Saul and his army were enc[illegible]nd, as they were all in a deep sleep, he had full opportunity of gratifying his revenge, if he had entertained any such design*. But, though he was exhorted to it by his attendant, he abstained from violence, not through political, but religious motives, convinced that he could not "stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless." He expressed his confidence, that the Lord would in due time deliver him from his adversary: in patient expectation of that event, he was willing to remain a sufferer, and would not avenge himself. The spear and the cruse of water were taken from the king's head, and held up to him as a proof that his life had again been spared. In the tenderest and most affectionate manner, David once more expostulated with him on his injurious conduct, and warned him of the awful consequences. This fresh instance of generosity had a surprising effect upon Saul; and, from his strong professions, we should have thought that an immediate reconciliation would follow. But David, through an evident distrust of his declarations, departed from him,

* 1 Sam. xxvi. 4, &c.

and

and referred the decision of the contest to the righteous Governor of heaven.

Such patient perseverance in dependence upon God reproves our vehemence of spirit, our unwillingness to wait the disposal of Providence. What eagerness do we discover to extricate ourselves from our trifling difficulties, forgetting that "the Lord reign[illegible]." And do we not betray sad marks of a petulan[illegible]able, vindictive disposition toward those, who [illegible]? If so, we possess little of the faith or meekness of David.

Yet even this eminent saint lived not in the constant exercise of his own principles. Wearied out with the length of his trials, or unmindful of the divine promise, and giving way to the suggestions of unbelief, he said in his heart, "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul*." Afraid, therefore, to remain any longer in the land of Judah, where he had been hitherto protected, he consulted his safety without asking direction from the Lord, and sought a place of refuge even among the enemies of Israel, in the country of the Philistines. This, doubtless, was a wrong step; and it is no wonder that he was hereby led into various difficulties and temptations. Ah! what a train of evils follows from unbelief! When we forget our past experience of the Lord's mercies, and His gracious assurances, we shall be overwhelmed with desponding apprehensions, and, probably, be induced to adopt some dishonourable expedient, in order to get rid of our troubles. How many, who a little while ago could triumph in the security of the Covenant, are now dis-

* 1 Sam. xxvii. 1, &c

mayed with terrible fear, and say, I shall finally perish! And are there not those too, who, in an anxious concern for their own preservation and that of their families, have formed very unsuitable connections with irreligious characters? We shall not, then, be surprised to hear, that they are carried from one inconsistency to another. [illegible]othing can so effectually establish us in holy t[illegible]nd practices, and preserve us from perplexi[illegible]n unshaken dependence upon the promises [illegible] God in Christ Jesus.

Achish, the king of the Philistines, was disposed to favour David, and, probably with the hopes of separating him entirely from the interests of Israel, afforded both him and his followers a comfortable retreat. While he was in that situation, he made incursions upon the Amalekites and their neighbours, whom the Lord had commanded to be destroyed, and utterly desolated their towns: but, to avoid the displeasure of Achish, and to encourage the idea, that he was faithfully attached to the Philistines, he was guilty of a mean equivocation; for he pretended to have been fighting against his own countrymen. This was such an instance of dissimulation, as we may account for, indeed, but attempt not to defend. Let us beware of associating with those, who cannot act in concert with us, as the servants of God: for their friendship may be a snare to us, either deterring us from the discharge of our duty, or leading us to some base artifice, that we may conceal what they dislike. The patronage of wicked men is rarely preserved with a good conscience.

David

David was brought into another difficulty by this connection with the Philistines. They were preparing for war against Israel, and Achish required him to join the expedition *. His perplexity on this occasion must have been great. For how should he turn his arms against his own nation? and yet how should he refuse to obey the injunction of a king, who had received and protected him? He appeared to acquiesce in the scheme, and, together with his forces, followed the host of the Philistines. But it pleased God, who alone can work deliverance, to extricate him from his embarrassment. The lords of the Philistines suspected his integrity; and, in compliance with their requisition, Achish, though most reluctantly, dismissed him from his service, and, with high commendations of his character, intreated him to retire. The release was critical, and must have gratified the wishes of David. Yet, desirous of the prince's favour, he seemed to lament, that he was injuriously prevented from testifying his fidelity. His professions, we own, carry with them the marks of duplicity, and are utterly inconsistent with that openness and simplicity, which we have a right to expect from a servant of God. But the smiles of a Court are dangerous to virtue; and those, who needlessly attach themselves to such as are enemies to the Israel of God, will not long persevere in an honourable conduct: for they generally " fall into temptation and a snare."

The Lord had mercifully delivered David from the necessity, to which he was reduced, either of perfidiously deserting the Philistines, or of being accessary

* 1 Sam. xxviii. 1, 2, xxix. 1, &c.

to the deſtruction of Iſrael. Yet a heavy calamity awaited him; and it appears to have been the divine purpoſe to puniſh and to humble him, for his unbelief and neglect of God in ſeeking the protection of aliens. His city, to which he was returning, was taken by the Amalekites, and utterly conſumed with fire; his wives and family, and thoſe of all his followers, were led into captivity, and all their poſſeſſions plundered*. This alone would have been extremely diſtreſſing; but the anguiſh of his ſpirit was increaſed by the rage of his own people againſt him. They blamed him as the cauſe of all their trouble, and formed the deſign of killing him. In ſo embarraſſed a ſituation, what ſupport or expedient was left him? Here we behold the power and the excellence of faith. "He encouraged himſelf in the Lord his God." Though all men forſook him, he ſtill doubted not, that the Lord would ſtand by him and ſave him; and therefore, confiding in His faithfulneſs and ſtrength, he expected a happy iſſue.

By our own unadviſed ſchemes, originating from impatience and diſtruſt, we may involve ourſelves in a variety of difficulties; yet even then, though ſhame and humiliation become us, we need not, we ſhould not, caſt away our hope in God. He is ſtill ready to pardon, and ſpare, and protect us; and therefore, looking to His promiſes, we may encourage ourſelves in Him.

But, while we expect ſupport from the Lord, we muſt ſeek it in prayer, and in a diligent attention to

* 1 Sam. xxx. 1, &c.

the means, which He hath appointed. David, we fear, had neglected to do this, when he fled to the Philistines; but now his first object was, to consult the Lord by the high-priest. Having obtained a favourable answer, with amazing activity and courage he pursued, overtook, and conquered the enemy; and soon recovered from them all their spoil, and all their prisoners; for the plunderers had been restrained from offering violence to their persons, by an over-ruling influence upon their minds. The victory, which was complete, he devoutly ascribed to God. Nor did he manifest his piety alone upon that occasion; his justice to the weak, enfeebled soldiers, whom he would not suffer to be defrauded, and his generosity to the friends, who had espoused his cause, were also conspicuous.

Thus, we perceive, the compassion of God is extended to those, who trust Him. He graciously mitigates and removes the troubles, which their folly has incurred. O may we learn to ask counsel of Him, and then go forth in obedience to his directions, and in reliance upon his promise. Nor let us forget, in an attention to devotion, the duties we owe to one another. How many have claims upon us! It will be a disgrace to our religion, if, in the hour of prosperity, we do not plead in behalf of the helpless, or if we be unmindful of those, who have attached themselves to our interest.

Years before Christ, 1056. We are now arrived at one of the most important Eras of David's life. About the time, when he was involved in his late complicated distresses, the decisive blow was struck by the Philistines,

tines, and Saul, the king of Iſrael, was ſlain in the battle*. This was an event, at which, we might have ſuppoſed, he would have rejoiced exceedingly; ſince hereby his furious perſecutor was removed, and his way to the throne was cleared. But, far from a revengeful or ambitious ſpirit, he ſought not the ruin of his enemy, nor took one ſtep to procure his own advancement. Nay, when the tidings were brought him, "he rent his clothes, he mourned, he wept, he faſted," and even avenged the death of Saul upon the Amalekite, who boaſted of having murdered the Lord's anointed.

This laſt action of David is cenſured, as an inſtance of cruelty and injuſtice. But what would have been ſaid, had the man been rewarded and preferred? It ought not to be forgotten, that he was one of that accurſed nation, which the Lord had devoted to deſtruction, and that, according to his own confeſſion, he had deſerved to die, by taking away the life of the prince†.

The whole deportment of David manifeſts the utmoſt reverence for Saul, and ſtrongeſt attachment to him. He ſeemed deſirous that his memory ſhould be handed down to poſterity with reſpect, lamenting his loſs in a moſt beautiful elegy, which celebrated the ta-

* 2 Sam. i. 1, &c.

† As Saul is ſaid to have fallen upon his own ſword, it is probable, that the Amalekite's account was falſe, and that he had invented the ſtory with the expectation of a recompence. David, however, not knowing the circumſtances, did right in treating the man ſuitably to his own confeſſion.

lents and achievements of the deceafed monarch, and caft a vail over his criminal and injurious conduct. His diftrefs, doubtlefs, was increafed by the death of his moft amiable and beloved friend Jonathan, who alfo perifhed in the fame battle, and for whom he mourned with expreffions of pungent grief. But to an ambitious mind this would have been a joyful circumftance, becaufe Jonathan might have proved a formidable rival, being next in fucceffion to the throne, and a peculiar favourite with the people.

Is not fuch difintereftednefs uncommon? Do we often obferve men to weep, with undiffembled forrow, at the removal of thofe, who obftruct their views of preferment in the world?—Or, is there any thing in David's behaviour to countenance an oppofition to juft government? His carriage, throughout, was far from that of a feditious, proud, and afpiring perfon: and we are conftrained to own, that his exaltation was of God.

The regal office was now vacant: and who fhall undertake it, or difpofe of it? The divine commiffion had been iffued, fome time before, appointing David to it; and this had been generally underftood. Multitudes, therefore, of the Ifraelites, upon the death of Saul, flocked to him at Ziklag, with an expectation, probably, of his coming to the immediate poffeffion of the kingdom. Nor had he forgotten the promife: but, as he looked to receive the power from the hands of the Lord, fo he determined to do nothing without His direction. According to the inftituted means, he enquired of God, whether he fhould remove into the land

land of Judah: and, by exprefs revelation, he returned to his native country, and fixed his refidence at Hebron*. There he began his reign, though for fome years his authority was not complete. The men of Judah acknowledged his right to the crown, and with the ufual folemnities publicly proclaimed him their king.

Here, then, his trials might feem to be ended; for he had before him the flattering profpect of dominion, wealth, and dignity. In the patient expectation of this event, he had endured extreme fufferings; and at length he was not difappointed of his hope. "He that believeth fhall not make hafte." Whence arifes our precipitation, or our diftrefs, when the purpofes of God are delayed? Do we not ftagger in our minds through unbelief? Therefore every trifling difficulty hides the promife from our eyes, and excites many tumultuous fears within us. But the prefent hiftory will teach us, that "there is no wifdom, nor underftanding, nor counfel againft the Lord †." Saul had long laboured to prevent the acceffion of the fon of Jeffe to the throne. But all his fchemes ended in confufion: and fo indeed muft end all oppofition to the caufe of God. If He be for us, it matters little, who, or what, can be againft us. The poor perfecuted faint ftruggled for many years with a violent enemy; but he was preferved from all affaults by an invifible, Almighty hand, and at laft crowned with glory. Surely the dealings of God with his Church of old fhould encourage our hope and confidence, amidft dif-

* 2 Sam. ii. 1, &c. † Prov. xxi. 30.

ficulties which appear insurmountable. What, though our conflict be sharp, and "we have no might against this great company, that cometh against us," let us fly to the God of Jacob for our refuge; let us trust, and not be afraid; and soon shall our strongest adversaries be subdued under our feet, and we shall be put in possession of a kingdom, infinitely better than that of David, "a kingdom that cannot be moved."

What were David's sentiments upon his advancement, his psalms will testify; for in them he breathed out the devout affections of his soul, and called on all the people to join with him in admiring and praising that astonishing dispensation, which had brought him to the throne. Ah! how different from that proud, imperious spirit, that profane contempt of God, which generally accompanies men, who rise to a state of greatness! Such meekness, and such piety, as we observe in "the sweet singer of Israel," are rare endowments every where, more especially so amidst the ensnaring scenes of grandeur.

But we turn our eyes to One of higher excellence and dignity, than the king of Judah: we behold Jesus, the Son of David, made like to his progenitor and type. He also passed through much tribulation, continued for many years in the deepest abasement, "being despised and rejected," and endured a conflict of all others the most violent. But in vain were the powers of earth and Hell united against Him: the decree was gone forth, and nothing could reverse it. The Lord God had said, that He would "give unto him the throne of his father David," and that "of his kingdom

there

there ſhould be no end *." To that throne He is now exalted, and all nations are required to yield an unreſerved ſubmiſſion to Him. Who are they, then, that allow his claim, and "take his yoke upon them?" Alas! we dwell among ſuch as are his avowed opponents. Do not the lives and tempers of thouſands declare, whatever their tongues may profeſs, that they are diſaffected to His government, and are not to be ranked with his ſubjects? But let them fear the effects of his wrath; for He will maintain his right. O bow to the ſceptre of his grace, and cheerfully receive him in his regal character! And let thoſe, who acknowledge him for their Sovereign, not be aſhamed or wearied of his ſervice, but boldly teſtify to others the bleſſedneſs they have enjoyed under Him. "Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King."

* Luke i. 32, 33.

DAVID.

SECT. 3.

David recompensed the men, who buried Saul—opposed by Ishbosheth—distressed by the murder of Abner—punished the murderers of Ishbosheth—declared king of all Israel —his great prosperity—prepared to conduct the ark to Jerusalem—displeased at Uzzah's death—brought the ark with great joy—his attention to the public worship and to family religion—despised by his wife Michal—forbidden to build the temple—yet comforted by the divine promises.

WE have followed David through a long series of trials, which, though most afflictive, contributed to his advantage, and prepared him for succeeding greatness and extensive usefulness. We have seen the divine promises to him fulfilled, the formidable opposition against him vanquished, and the poor persecuted youth who was taken from the sheep-folds, immediately after the death of Saul seated on the throne of Judah. His difficulties, indeed, were not all ended: but a scene of another kind now opens upon us. We shall now behold the man, who was obliged to hide himself "in dens and caves of the earth," advanced to the most elevated dignity. Nor will his example, in these very different circumstances, fail to convey to us many profitable lessons of instruction.

He

Years before Christ, 1055. He began his reign with an action, which must have tended to conciliate the affections of the people, and shewed, that he was not actuated by ambition, envy, or revenge. He recompensed the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead for their loyal regard to their deceased monarch in burying his remains, which they had rescued from the insults of the Philistines *. But the most disinterested conduct will not always prevent prejudice and opposition. Abner, who had been a principal officer in Saul's army, and now probably aspired after power, set up Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, and prevailed upon the tribes of Israel to receive him for their king, and to reject the man, whom the Lord had declared to be the object of his choice. This betrayed an ungrateful, perverse, and rebellious spirit in them; but it proved a blessing to David. For by this resistance further evidence was given of the Lord's faithfulness and love to him; and his own wisdom, piety, meekness, and patience were also manifested and increased.

At first, it should seem, David acted only upon the defensive; but, after two years, the turbulence and pride of Abner and his party stirred up a civil war, which, though attended with much bloodshed, issued in the advancement of David to the complete possession of the regal power. "There was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker †."——The purposes of God, however opposed, cannot be defeated. The

* 2 Sam. ii. 5, &c. † iii. 1, &c.

kingdom

kingdom of Jesus must spread from one degree of enlargement to another, till it subdue and incorporate all nations of the earth. The adversaries of the Lord will be found liars, and all their machinations turn to their own confusion. Believers, fear not to trust your concerns in the hand of your gracious God. He suffers you to struggle for a while with powerful and malicious foes; but, depending on the promise, you shall renew your strength, and gain continual advantages, till your enemies be perfectly and for ever vanquished and destroyed.

The leaders of the faction began to quarrel among themselves; and Abner, offended by the reproaches of Ishbosheth, undertook, through a spirit of proud revenge, to alienate his subjects from him, and attach them to David's interest. The proposal was made to David, and a treaty entered into. As a preliminary article, the king insisted upon the restoration of his wife Michal, who, by the violence of her father Saul, had been torn from him and given to another. The scheme seemed ripe for execution, when it was frustrated by a catastrophe, most painful to David. His principal officers, Joab and his brother Abishai, who were men of an insolent and vindictive disposition, had obtained such an influence over him, that he knew not how to restrain them. In a treacherous manner they contrived to assassinate the very person, who was using his interest to deliver up the whole government to their master. This detestable perfidy deserved the most rigorous punishment. Perhaps David was blamable for not putting the murderers to death. But in such an unsettled

unſettled ſtate, he felt his own weakneſs, and dreaded the conſequences of ſeverity: for the preſent, therefore, the offenders eſcaped with impunity. If we preſume to cenſure his lenity, we muſt allow at leaſt, that thoſe who poſſeſs the higheſt authority, cannot do all they would. We ſhould compaſſionate, rather than envy their ſituation. Their hands are often tied by ſome or other of their ſubjects, and they are obliged to adopt the complaint of David, "I am this day weak, and theſe men be too hard for me."

Yet his conduct on this occaſion diſcovered an integrity and a tenderneſs of mind, which endeared him to his people. He was ſtruck with horror at the iniquity of the tranſaction; and, while he ſolemnly proteſted his innocence, he deprecated the divine vengeance from himſelf and his kingdom, and foretold the heavy judgments which would ſurely fall on the head of the guilty. To teſtify his reſpect for the deceaſed, he commanded his burial to be attended by Joab, the principal aſſaſſin, and his numerous retinue. He himſelf alſo followed the bier with loud lamentations, and in the whole of his deportment ſhewed the moſt unfeigned ſorrow.——And are we all, in our ſeveral ſtations, grieved for the wickedneſs, which we are compelled to witneſs, and which we cannot prevent or remedy? Do "our ſouls weep in ſecret places for the pride" and the many abominations, which prevail around us? Ah! whence this indifference about the actions of others, but from a total diſregard of the honour of God and the ſalvation of our fellow creatures?

Very

Very ſoon afterward the deſired event took place, but in a way, which David neither contrived nor approved. Iſhboſheth, the competitor for the government, was murdered by two of his own ſervants, who carried his head to David, and expected from him a reward for their villany *. But he ſought not power by ſuch baſe treachery as this: and therefore, though the oppoſition againſt him was hereby defeated, he was ſhocked with the horrible wickedneſs they had committed, and, as a righteous judge, he inſtantly commanded them to be put to death. He looked for his advancement from the Lord, and would not adopt or countenance any iniquitous meaſure, to haſten the divine purpoſe.

We admire the generoſity and diſintereſtedneſs of this conduct. How far removed from an ambitious or malevolent ſpirit! Are we like minded? Are not we forward to avenge ourſelves, and unwilling to await the ſlow deciſions of Providence? Or, though we ſhould fear to perpetrate an ignominious action in our own perſons, ſhould not we rejoice to gain an advantage by the deceit or cruelty of others? How rare is it to weep for the unjuſt oppreſſion of an enemy!

Years before Chriſt, 1048. The men of Iſrael had now loſt their Head, and perceived, probably, their own folly in oppoſing a prince of God's appointment. They had, likewiſe, fully proved the wiſdom, courage, and integrity of David; and therefore, without any violence, or threatening, or ſolicitation on his part, they voluntarily intreated him to take upon him the whole

* 2 Sam. iv. 1, &c.

government,

government, from the consideration of their near relation to him, and the Lord's express designation of him to that office *. Their elders were deputed to settle the business; and with them David entered into a solemn league, to administer justice throughout the land. He was then declared to be their king; and not only their numerous armies came to acknowledge their subjection to him, but all the nation testified their joy upon his accession to the throne †. Thus, after an interval of seven years and a half from the death of Saul, and more than fifteen from his first consecration by the hand of Samuel, at the age of thirty he found himself in the full and undisputed possession of the sovereignty. The situation, doubtless, was the more agreeable, because he was raised to it by the immediate direction of God, according to His repeated promises, and called to it by the unanimous voice of the people, who eagerly desired him to be their ruler. ——In no instance will the Lord finally disappoint those expectations, which are grounded on His word. They may be delayed awhile, in order to strengthen and to manifest our faith and patience. But, if we are willing to wait, we shall in due time obtain the blessing; and it will be doubly sweet and precious, if we can see the hand of God bestowing it, and we ourselves have resolutely refused to pursue any undue measures to procure it.

The same power, which placed David in this exalted station, supported him in it. Under an Almighty protection, he enlarged his dominions, and

* 2 Sam. v. 1, &c. † 1 Chron. xii. 23, &c.

David had been actuated by a very pious principle, but, probably, had undertaken this business with a degree of rashness and pride. When, therefore, he met with so severe a rebuke, he was confounded, and, considering himself as ill treated, was ready to quarrel with God for the tremendous dispensation. Not yet sensible of his own fault, he felt the rising of an angry, rebellious spirit against his Judge, and, as if he were afraid to have any further concerns with the ark, he left his scheme unfinished, and the whole company was dispersed. Alas! how prone are we to fly from one evil temper to another! How liable, either to be lifted up with presumption, or to be cast down in a sullen despondency!

After three months David appeared to be convinced of his crime, and determined to resume the plan, he had deserted. With great pomp, therefore, as before, but with a more humble and devout disposition, and guarding against his former errors, he went to convey the ark to Jerusalem from the house of Obededom, with whom it had remained during the interval, and whom the Lord had blessed for his pious attention to it*. The procession began with holy worship, accompanied with sacrifice, and the king himself was not ashamed to take a leading part in the solemnity. At the head of his people, and as a minister of religion, he conducted the sacred ceremonies, and, by his extraordinary activity, testified the fervour of his zeal, and love, and joy. At length his desire was accomplished; and, when the ark of God was fixed in its place, he offered up various

* See 1 Chron. xv. and xvi.

oblations

oblations to Heaven with humility and gratitude. As a prophet, no leſs than a prince, he made interceſſion for his ſubjects, and pronounced his benediction upon them.

He had compoſed for the occaſion Pſalms of praiſe and thankſgiving to the God of Iſrael, which he delivered to the perſons appointed to officiate in that ſervice; and all the multitude joined in ſinging thoſe holy ſongs with loud acclamations. There appeared to be but one heart and one voice throughout the numerous aſſembly, while they paid their adorations to God, in the moſt animated forms of devotion. The whole company were alſo liberally entertained and feaſted at their Sovereign's expence, before they departed to their reſpective habitations. And ſurely, they muſt have departed with the livelieſt impreſſions in favour of religion, after they had beheld in their monarch ſo eminent a pattern of real and fervent piety towards God; of piety too, which would ſeem the more amiable, as being adorned with acts of condeſcenſion and munificence towards men.

Nor was David ſatisfied with directing and aſſiſting the ſolemnities of that remarkable ſeaſon; but he then took the opportunity of regulating the divine ſervice for the future, and made proviſion for the ſtated celebration of the ordinances, both at Jeruſalem, and at Gibeon, where the ancient tabernacle ſtill remained. The conſtancy, ſeriouſneſs, and delight, with which he attended at the place of public worſhip, and the very ardent affections with which he was wont to pour out his ſoul before God, in the preſence of his people, ſufficiently appear from the book of pſalms, and furniſh

greater than his were. He ſaw the day of Chriſt, but he ſaw it at a diſtance. To us the Saviour, the promiſed Seed of Abraham, has appeared; and we are called to partake of all the bleſſings, which He beſtows. But, if we be joined to Chriſt, we muſt renounce the world, with all its pomps and vanities, and, like Abraham, we muſt be as "ſtrangers upon earth." Ah! how few anſwer to this deſcription! The generality of mankind determine to enjoy as much of ſenſual pleaſures as lies within their reach, and grieve they can have no more.—But let thoſe, who are ſeeking a better country, hold on their way, rejoicing in the confidence, that the God of Abraham is their God: "He will be their guide unto death, and their portion for ever."

comes every individual, by his example and influence, to recommend a ſerious and devout regard to the means of grace. How much might be effected by zealous exertions for this purpoſe, even among thoſe, who are not diſtinguiſhed by rank! But it is a concern, which would not diſgrace the moſt exalted monarch: and more extenſive good, doubtleſs, might be accompliſhed by perſons in authority. May it pleaſe God to pour out His Spirit upon kings and rulers; ſo ſhall we hope to ſee a revival of His work among their ſubjects!

"David returned to bleſs his houſe," to perform the offices of domeſtic religion, to inſtruct his family, and to preſent, both with them and for them, the ſolemn ſacrifice of prayer and praiſe. Thoſe, who are engaged in public ſervices, ſhould alſo "learn to ſhew piety at home." One duty does not ſuperſede another: and real godlineſs conſiſts very much in giving to different duties their proper place and proportion. The members of our houſehold have a peculiar claim upon us; nor can we poſſeſs any true regard for our own ſouls, unleſs we labour to promote the ſpiritual welfare of thoſe, who are our immediate charge. We ſhall be unfaithful, both to God and man, whatever be our rank in life, if we do not reſolve with Joſhua, "As for me and my houſe, we will ſerve the Lord."

But the moſt upright and amiable conduct is liable to miſconſtructions and injurious cenſures. Nay, we are warned, from the examples of ancient ſaints, to expect oppoſition and contempt, as far as we diſcover

any real fervour in the ſervice of God. Nor ſhould we wonder, if on ſuch an occaſion "a man's foes be they of his own houſehold." King David was deſpiſed and inſulted by his wife Michal, who had witneſſed his pious ardour in dancing before the ark; and his behaviour was baſely miſrepreſented, as if it were diſgraceful to his character. Though theſe reproaches could not but be very painful, as coming from ſuch a quarter, he gloried in them as moſt honourable, and determined to be more zealous in the cauſe of God, to whatever inſults it might expoſe him: "I will yet," ſaid he, "be more vile than thus."——How forcibly does this admoniſh us, not to be aſhamed or diſcouraged, when our beſt actions are calumniated, and the worſt motives imputed to us, even by our deareſt friends! In ſuch circumſtances it may afford us ſome ſupport, to reflect, that we are treading in the ſteps of the moſt excellent of the earth, and are ſuffering no other ſlanders, than what they cheerfully ſubmitted to. In the ſtrength of God, then, let us alſo ſay, "I will be more vile than thus."

Years before Chriſt, 1042.

We have obſerved, that David, though elevated to the higheſt dignity, did not forget his God. It was his firſt concern, to teſtify his regard for the ark of the Covenant, and to inſtitute the ordinances of public worſhip near to his own palace. Still he was diſſatisfied, that, while he enjoyed ſo much ſplendour in his own habitation, there was an external meanneſs about the divine ſervice, as nothing better than a tent had yet been provided for the reception

ception of the ark*. For the honour of the God of Iſrael, therefore, he formed the deſign of erecting a magnificent temple, in which all their religious rites might be commodiouſly adminiſtered. The intention was excellent and acceptable; yet it pleaſed God to forbid, for the preſent, the further proſecution of the ſcheme. Nathan, the prophet, who had firſt approved and encouraged the work, was ſent with an expreſs meſſage from the Lord, requiring the king to deſiſt from it. David was reminded, that the Lord had already diſtinguiſhed him in a peculiar manner, by raiſing him to ſo high a degree of power and reputation in the world. He was aſſured, that his propoſal was not rejected in diſpleaſure, that other ſervices of a different kind and of great importance were appointed for him, and that a ſon ſhould be given him, who ſhould ſucceed to the kingdom in all its glory, and fully execute the plan of building a temple. The moſt gracious promiſes were added, to encourage his expectation of the perpetual continuance of the crown in his family, and to direct his attention and his faith to that exalted Perſonage, who ſhould ariſe from his ſeed, with whom the everlaſting Covenant is eſtabliſhed, and "of whoſe kingdom there ſhall be no end."

This declaration of the divine will had its proper effect upon David. He murmured not, that his pious intention was defeated, but, under the ſtrongeſt impreſſions of gratitude, love, and joy, he poured out his ſoul before God in admiration, praiſe, and prayer.

* 2 Sam. vii. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xvii. 1, &c. See alſo Pſal. cxxxii. 2,—5.

Overwhelmed with a ſenſe of what the Lord had done, and ſtill engaged to do, for him, he cried out, "Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my houſe, that thou haſt brought me hitherto?" The promiſe of the bleſſings deſigned for him, and for the Church through his poſterity, appeared too great and excellent to be credited; but, fixing his regard upon the divine word, he could expect them, and aſk for them. Encouraged and emboldened by theſe gracious aſſurances, he intreated God to fulfil his own purpoſes of mercy, and to glorify Himſelf by the eſtabliſhment of his kingdom throughout all generations.

What a pattern of activity and fervour in religion, of lively faith and hope, attended with the deepeſt humility! Where are thoſe, in high ſtations, who are as anxious to provide for the adminiſtration of the divine ſervice, as for their own private accommodations? Alas! do not they, who "dwell in houſes of cedar," deſpiſe God's ordinances, and countenance this contempt in others? Few perſons, of any rank, care about the ark, but almoſt all are eager to increaſe their own ſplendour and importance.

Have you been defeated in any pious deſigns, which you had formed? Are you not, then, diſpleaſed, or envious of others, who are called to act for the benefit of the Church, in preference to you? Yet of this you may be aſſured, every good principle and intention, you have had, ſhall meet the approbation of your Judge. He will ſay to you, as He did to David, "Thou didſt well, that it was in thine heart*." But

* 1 Kings, viii. 18.

it is possible, that, though truly devoted to God, you may mistake the line of duty and of usefulness, and attempt that, for which you are unfit, and in which you are not meant to be employed. Do not overlook, or despise the post assigned you. Be thankful, that in any way you can promote the interests of religion. Review the steps, by which you have been led; and, when you consider your own unworthiness, and the high favours bestowed upon you, will you not be constrained to cry out, in a transport of devout admiration and gratitude, "Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?

Have you not also, in the Gospel of Christ, "exceeding great and precious promises," by which your God in Covenant has bound himself to bless you, even to the end? These will enliven your hopes, and embolden your requests. O praise the Lord, who has dealt so bountifully with you! For "He hath brought you to great honour, and comforted you on every side." What thanks, and love, and obedience are due to Him! What mercies may you not look for at His hands! Go, and present your petitions to Him, on the ground of his own declarations. Put Him in remembrance of what He has said; and, though otherwise you should not have presumed to ask for any favour, plead His solemn engagements, as David, "O think upon thy servant, as concerning thy word, wherein thou hast caused me to put my trust!"

D A V I D.

SECT. 4.

David ſubdued various enemies—dedicated the ſpoils to God—adminiſtered juſtice—ſhewed favour to Mephiboſheth—went to war with the Ammonites—ſinned with Bathſheba—contrived Uriah's death—reproved by Nathan—repented—his behaviour on the child's ſickneſs and death—reflections on his fall.

FERVOUR of devotion has ſometimes been conſidered as inconſiſtent with the active duties of a General or a Governor. But we ſee them united in the very eminent character we are now contemplating. David was ardent in his addreſſes to God; on ſome occaſions he conducted the religious ſervices of the people, as a prophet and a preacher of righteouſneſs; and he longed for the opportunities of public worſhip, as his higheſt privilege and delight. But he was not thereby unfitted for the vigorous exertions, required in a Stateſman and a Soldier. He could preſide in the Council, direct the movements of a numerous army, and with an undaunted courage march forth to the field of battle. In theſe ſeveral employments, alſo, he diſplayed very great abilities: yet not to his qualifications, but to the divine bleſſing, we are taught to aſcribe his remarkable ſucceſſes in war.

He

Years before Christ, about 1040.

He turned his arms against the Philistines, the Moabites, the Syrians, the Edomites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites, and obtained the most decisive victories over them *. Throughout some of those powerful nations he spread utter desolation; and others were made tributary to him. Such extensive conquests brought immense riches into his treasury, and rendered his name illustrious far and wide. "The Lord preserved him, whithersoever he went." He was the Lord's servant, acting under his express commission: and this consideration may justify his treatment of some whom he had subdued, which has, to us, the appearance of wanton cruelty or revenge. He fought the Lord's battles, and executed His righteous vengeance on those guilty states, which had been long before devoted to destruction. The stroke of justice may be delayed; but at last it will fall upon the head of the rebellious: and the Almighty Governor, surely, has a right to appoint, in what manner they shall be punished.

The power and goodness of God, exerted on the behalf of David, were conspicuous; but we also perceive and admire His faithfulness toward the Israelites. The promise was made to Abraham, "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt, unto the great river, the river Euphrates †." This had been, only in part, fulfilled under the command of Joshua. Some of the ancient inhabitants retained a considerable extent of dominion, till the time of Da-

* 2 Sam. viii. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xviii. 1, &c. † Gen. xv. 18.

vid;

vid; for they were ſpared, among other reaſons, that they might be a teſt and a ſcourge to Iſrael, as "pricks in their eyes, and thorns in their ſides *." But at laſt the Lord granted his people the entire poſſeſſion of the country, according to his word; and not one of their enemies was able to ſtand before them.—Thus alſo He now deals with his ſpiritual Iſrael. They are the objects of His care and love; and He has engaged to beſtow upon them an inheritance of unſpeakable bliſs and glory. But his purpoſe of mercy is delayed for a ſeaſon. They are delivered from a ſtate of captivity, and His arm is continually ſtretched out for their defence. But He ſuffers them, for the preſent, to be tried by their own corrupt affections, which, like the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan, are not wholly extirpated. Their king, however, the true David, who undertakes to be their Leader, will ſhortly put an end to the conflict, by deſtroying their adverſaries for ever; and in Him the promiſes of God will be fulfilled, to the everlaſting joy and exaltation of his Church.

David was not actuated by mercenary or ambitious views, in the enlargement of his dominions; for all the riches he acquired, and the immenſe ſpoils which accrued to him, "he dedicated to the Lord," devoting them entirely to the ſervice of the temple, which yet he was forbidden to build. An increaſe of power and wealth, too often purchaſed at the expence of juſtice and humanity, is generally the means of cheriſhing pride and ſenſuality, and thus proves a curſe to the community, as well as to the poſſeſſors themſelves.

* Num. xxxiii. 55.

But,

But, when obtained in a confiftence with the will of God, and improved for the advancement of His caufe in the world, it adds a luftre to the owners, and is a public bleffing. Learn, then, to "honour the Lord with thy fubftance, and with the firft fruits of all thine increafe *."

The king of Ifrael was not inattentive alfo to the righteous adminiftration of government among his fubjects. "He executed judgment and juftice unto all his people."——We are thankful, not only for the advantages we enjoy under our civil conftitution, but for the excellence of that fpiritual kingdom, of which David's was a type.

We admire the meeknefs and benevolence of David in the midft of his profperity. So far from entertaining any fentiments of revenge againft the defcendants of Saul, for the injurious treatment he had received from him, he was anxious to difcover fome remnant of that family, to whom he might fhew a peculiar favour †. He could not forget the friendfhip of Jonathan, and the covenant by which they had been bound to each other; and therefore he wifhed to teftify his gratitude and fidelity. After much enquiry, he found out Mephibofheth, a fon of that amiable prince, brought him from his concealment, generoufly beftowed on him the whole paternal eftate, which had been forfeited, and conftantly admitted him to a place at the royal table. We forbear to comment on this difinterefted conduct: but we learn our own obligations to fearch out thofe diftreffed objects, who, on principles of juf-

* Prov. iii. 9. † 2 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

tice

tice as well as compaſſion, have a claim to our kindneſs. What means the ſelfiſh man, who conſults no one's comfort, but his own; who is unmindful of paſt favours, or needs to be ſolicited on behalf of the children of a deceaſed benefactor? He is incapable of the fine feelings of friendſhip; nor is it likely, that he will be influenced, even by the ſolemnity of an oath.

Years before Chriſt, about 1037. In purſuing the hiſtory of David, we find him involved in a war with the Ammonites, through their inſolent and injurious treatment of his ambaſſadors*. They had groſsly inſulted him in the perſons of his repreſentatives, and afterward, apprehending his diſpleaſure, collected numerous forces, and commenced hoſtilities againſt him. Joab, who was firſt ſent out againſt them, with a powerful body, proved victorious; and then the king himſelf at the head of all his troops took the field, and utterly ſubdued the Syrians, who were the allies of the enemy.

So far the character of David has appeared in an honourable light; and here we might wiſh to cloſe the account. The ſequel preſents us with a very melancholy ſtory, which tarniſhes the luſtre of his reputation, and may well excite in us many fears for ourſelves. We dare not conceal what God has been pleaſed to declare; and we are perſuaded, that ſome moſt inſtructive leſſons are to be learned from this mournful tranſaction. But we confeſs that we proceed to the relation with much backwardneſs, and with a ſad apprehenſion, that there are thoſe, who will hereby encourage and harden themſelves in ſin to their everlaſting

* 2 Sam. x. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xix. 1, &c.

ing perdition. The infidel and the fenfualift indulge a profane triumph upon this occafion: but their fcoffs be to themfelves! We charge them to keep at a diftance; and, while we approach to view the grievous fall of the man of God, we tremble, "confidering ourfelves, left we alfo be tempted," and we are conftrained to pray, "Leave us not, neither forfake us, O God of our falvation!"

"With what unwillingnefs, with what fear," fays Bifhop Hall, "do I look upon the mifcarriage of the man after God's own heart! O holy prophet, who can promife himfelf always to ftand, when he fees thee fallen, and maimed with the fall? Let profane eyes behold thee contentedly, as a pattern, as an excufe for finning; I fhall never look upon thee, but through tears, as a woful fpectacle of human infirmity."

David neglected to profecute the war againft the Ammonites, in his own perfon, but was content to leave the care of it to Joab, and himfelf continued at Jerufalem*. Had the concerns of government required his prefence, there would have been no fault, no danger, in keeping back from the field of battle. But there was an evident remiffnefs in duty. Perhaps he was lifted up by profperity, had abated much of his attention to religion, and adopted the plan of allowing himfelf more eafe and indulgence. It is therefore remarked, that "in an evening tide he arofe from off his bed," and, having addicted himfelf to floth, he was the more readily carried away with temptation. As he was walking upon the roof of his houfe, which

* 2 Sam. xi. 1, &c.

was an uſual practice, he beheld a beautiful woman bathing herſelf, and, through the unreſtrained wantonneſs of his eye, the fire of luſt was kindled in his heart. Immediately he formed the ſcheme of obtaining her; but, upon enquiry, he found her to be another's poſſeſſion. This, however, was no effectual bar in his way. He had given the rein to his deſires, and they were at length too ſtrong to be reſiſted. He ſent to her, ſolicited her compliance, and prevailed, and thus plunged both himſelf and her into the horrid guilt of adultery.

We ſtand in amazement, and aſk, "Is this the man, who had long maintained ſuch intimate communion with God, and ſurpaſſed all others in the fervour of devotion? Where now are thoſe earneſt aſpirations of his ſoul after God and His ordinances, which he had ſo often expreſſed?" Alas! we perceive in him a ſtriking proof of the deſperate wickedneſs of the human heart. The moſt holy ſaint has a tendency in his nature to depart from God, and, upon a ſuitable occaſion offered, is capable of committing the baſeſt ſin.——But grievous falls ſeldom happen ſuddenly. Thoſe, who have been eſtabliſhed in religion, are not at once betrayed into any open enormities of conduct. They are generally drawn from one neglect of duty to another; ſo that their declenſion is gradual, and frequently, for a long time, undiſcovered. Chriſtians, beware of the very firſt advance towards any wrong compliance. If you are not diligently attending to your proper work; if you are ſeeking eaſe, when activity is required, you are at leiſure to liſten to every ſolicitation.

ſolicitation. Your evil paſſions are gathering ſtrength, and, in ſuch a ſituation, you have no ground to expect aſſiſtance from above. You give yourſelves into the tempter's hands; and we ſhall not wonder at any abominations, into which you may run. Joſeph, in the faithful performance of his office, was preſerved, when ſtrongly preſſed to the commiſſion of adultery, and therefore replied with abhorrence, "How can I do this great wickedneſs, and ſin againſt God?" But David, whilſt remiſs and ſlothful, was hurried away by impure deſires, to the perpetrating of the moſt complicated iniquity.

After ſome time it was found, that Bathſheba had conceived by this adulterous commerce, and therefore, that it was likely to become matter of public notoriety. The king, who appears not to have felt any proper compunction for his guilt in the ſight of God, was very anxious to prevent his diſgrace in the eyes of the world. Inſtead, then, of confeſſing and repenting, he attempted by the meaneſt and moſt impious artifices to conceal the offence, and was thereby involved in wickedneſs of a ſtill more heinous kind. Uriah, the huſband of Bathſheba, was a bold and faithful officer in David's army, and had been long abſent from his wife, upon the king's ſervice. But, after this tranſaction, he was ſent for to Jeruſalem, and was deſired to return to his houſe, that he might be thought the father of the child. The veteran ſoldier came, but refuſed the indulgence of his own bed. It was imagined, however, that intemperance might lead him to it; and accordingly, David himſelf was baſe enough to intoxicate

cate the man. But even then his purpoſe failed. At laſt, having gone ſo far, he was prepared to go ſtill farther, and determined, that Uriah, whoſe rage he dreaded, ſhould be cut off. Yet, aſhamed to appear in ſo deteſtable a buſineſs, he would not diſpatch him with his own hand, or by open violence, but contrived to do it by the treachery of others. At his expreſs command, then, Uriah went back to the camp, was placed in the front of the battle, was deſerted, and ſlain. Thus murder completed what idleneſs and luſt began.

Oh, the deep deceitfulneſs of ſin! One tranſgreſſion paves the way for another; the ſecond hardens the heart, till a third is readily admitted. Had David been told beforehand, what complicated iniquity he was about to run into, he would have recoiled with horror, and would, probably, have ſaid, like Hazael, "But what? Is thy ſervant a dog, that he ſhould do this great thing*?" Alas! how changed! how fallen! But Satan is an artful tempter; and, becauſe it would defeat his own purpoſe, to diſcover the whole of his deſign at once, he makes gradual advances, juſt as far as our compliance may encourage him to proceed. Beware, then, of cheriſhing any one evil thought; for you know not, to what lengths it may carry you, or where the deſtructive conſequences of it may terminate.

Uriah being removed, the king took Bathſheba to wife; and, perhaps, this was the point he had aimed at. But, though he eſcaped the reſentment of an injured

* 2 Kings viii. 13.

husband,

husband, and seemed to be above the penalty of the law, which he had broken, he had incurred the displeasure of Jehovah; and ere long he was brought to "know and see, that it was an evil thing and bitter, that he had forsaken the Lord his God." We are astonished, indeed, to find, that many months elapsed, before any contrition was expressed or felt. He had sunk into a deep lethargy; and his conscience, which, we might have supposed, would have been filled with horror and dismay, was deprived of its sensibility. He might, possibly, continue some external acts of worship, but he had lost all the spirituality, life, and comfort of religion. The Spirit of God was grieved, and departed from him; yet it does not appear, that he lamented his state, or once intreated the divine visitant to return.—Here also we discover the extreme depravity of our nature. If left to ourselves, we should not only run from one abomination to another, but willingly persevere in them, and never seriously think of coming back again to God. The exertion of his mighty power is necessary for the recovery of a backslider, as much as for the first conversion of a sinner.

The prophet Nathan was sent by revelation to awaken, to convict, and to reprove the king*. With great wisdom and prudence he addressed himself to this exalted criminal, representing in a feigned character the baseness of his conduct, and making him the judge of his own cause. When David, not perceiving the drift of the parable, had condemned the supposed offender,

* 2 Sam. xii. 1, &c.

 and

and thereby, in effect, paſſed ſentence upon himſelf, Nathan immediately urged the application, and with ſingular majeſty and courage, as the meſſenger of Heaven, cried out, "Thou art the man," and proceeded to ſtate before him the horrid nature, and peculiar aggravations, of his ſin. He denounced the diſpleaſure of God againſt him, and declared, that in conſequence thereof he ſhould feel the miſeries of war to the end of life, and experience inconceivable diſtreſſes from his own family. The reproof was bold and pointed, and the threatenings awful and moſt affecting.—When our duty calls us to ſo painful and difficult an office, as Nathan's was, may we poſſeſs the like wiſdom, firmneſs, and fidelity! And ſhould not the recovery of a backſlider be attempted? "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye, which are ſpiritual, reſtore ſuch an one*." A prudent regard ſhould be had to his ſtate and circumſtances; but ſurely we ſhould aim to rouſe his conſcience, by a faithful repreſentation of his heinous guilt, and of its terrible effects. The event of ſuch an addreſs muſt be left with God, who alone can render it ſucceſsful.

What, then, was the impreſſion upon the mind of the royal culprit? He was inſtantly awakened from his ſlumber, confounded, and humbled in the duſt. Full of anguiſh and horror, of ſhame and ſelf-abhorrence, feeling more than any words could utter, he gave vent to the diſtreſſes of his heart by this ſhort but frank confeſſion, "I have ſinned againſt the Lord." He

* Gal. vi. 1.

did

did not offer the leaſt excuſe, or plead any thing in extenuation of his offence, and, probably, dared not to hope, during his firſt pangs of grief, that there could be forgiveneſs for ſuch aggravated wickedneſs. A hypocrite, indeed, may adopt the ſame language, and acknowledge his crime; for ſo did Saul: but the Lord diſcerns an eſſential difference between the two characters. The diſſembler may be terrified with apprehenſions of his danger; but the real penitent poſſeſſes an utter deteſtation of himſelf, and can juſtify God in his everlaſting condemnation.

While David was thus overwhelmed with a ſenſe of his own baſeneſs, perhaps expecting to be ſuddenly deſtroyed for his iniquity, the Lord, who was privy to the inward contrition of his ſoul, commanded the prophet to comfort him, that he might not be "ſwallowed up with over much ſorrow." Nathan, therefore, inſtantly replied, "The Lord hath put away thy ſin; —thou ſhalt not die." Yet, though the ſtroke of divine juſtice was averted from the king, and he was ſpared to be a monument of mercy, it was declared, that, on account of that reproach which he had brought upon religion, the child, which was the fruit of his adulterous connection, ſhould ſurely be cut off.

The fears of his own deſtruction were hereby quieted; but he felt the chaſtiſement moſt painful to him, while he beheld the infant ſickening and expiring for his tranſgreſſion. He mourned, he faſted, he prayed; teſtifying his own humiliation, and indulging a hope that the diſeaſe might ſtill be removed through the

forbearance of God. But, upon the death of the child, he gave thanks, and rejoiced in the profpect of meeting it in a better world. His conduct upon this occafion affords us an inftructive example. In our deepeft diftreffes, even in thofe which our own crimes have produced, we fhould be encouraged to offer up the moft importunate fupplications; for "who can tell, whether God will be gracious to us?" And though He take from us, what we defire to retain, we fhould cheerfully fubmit, and love and praife Him.

Do you afk for a clearer evidence of David's repentance? The fequel of the hiftory will prove it. Or do you wifh to know the ftate of his mind upon the review of his late awful mifcarriage? Many of his pfalms defcribe his feelings; and, as being defigned for public worfhip, they were an open teftimony of his fincere contrition. Probably, foon after Nathan's departure from him, he retired, and breathed out his diftreffes before God in the penitential language of the fifty-firft pfalm, which was compofed for this mournful occafion. There we behold the king proftrate in the duft, diffolved in tears, and pleading for the life of his foul. With unutterable anguifh he looked back on what he had done, and perceived the dreadful confequences, and heinous nature, of his fin. He faw the difhonour brought upon religion, the righteous grieved, the wicked triumphing, the Spirit of God deferting him, and depriving him of thofe lively hopes and comforts he had once enjoyed. He had betrayed his

truft;

truſt; he had committed an irreparable injury to ſociety;—but he had alſo deſpiſed the authority and glory of the great Jehovah; and this conſideration, above all others, filled his conſcience with horror. Yet he did not therefore ſorrow, "as thoſe who have no hope." He was "perplexed, but not in deſpair; caſt down, but not deſtroyed;" and, through the divine promiſes of mercy, he indulged the pleaſing expectation, that his backſliding would be healed, that he ſhould live to admoniſh ſinners from his own example, and ſee the cauſe of God flouriſh around him.

What an aſtoniſhing hiſtory is here! Whether of the two appears the moſt wonderful,—the patience of God,—or the depth of iniquity in man? Do you aſk, "Why was not David recovered ſooner?" Rather conſider the deſperate wickedneſs of the human heart, and admire the ſovereign grace of God in recovering him at all. Doubtleſs, he would have ſlept on in his ſpiritual ſtupor, had not God, in remembrance of his holy Covenant, interpoſed for his reſtoration.—— But do you enquire, "Why was not the whole of this ſhameleſs tranſaction prevented?" We allow, that it might have been ordered otherwiſe; and you think, that it would have been every way better. But do you charge the great Governor with want of foreſight, or miſmanagement? Leave to Him the ſecuring of his own glory, and believe it to be his prerogative, to bring much good out of evil. Let it ſuffice us, that He permitted it to take place; and, ſince He has re-

corded it for our benefit, be it our concern to profit from it. Away with the ſneering infidel, who treats all ſanctity as a mere pretence! Away with the unſound profeſſor of religion, who is hereby encouraged to perſiſt, and harden himſelf, in his wickedneſs! Theſe perſons, who read the Bible, only to find out excuſes for their ungodlineſs, exult in the fall of ſo eminent a ſaint; and what a holy man once committed, they do not heſitate continually to practiſe.—Would you juſtify your enormities from David's example? How prepoſterous is this! O conſider, that he abhorred his iniquity, and dared not to defend it, as you do. The very recollection of it occaſioned him the moſt pungent diſtreſs, even to the laſt. What will it avail you, that David once ſinned like you, unleſs you be reſtored to repentance and obedience, as he was? While you are ſtrangers to godly ſorrow, and remain careleſs and impenitent, whatever you may plead of the ſtability of the Covenant, and the perſeverance of the ſaints, we cannot addreſs you otherwiſe, than as the enemies of God, under the curſe of his law, and expoſed to his fiery indignation for ever. O turn to Him with weeping and with ſupplication; for "why will ye die?" Let there be joy in heaven over repenting ſinners upon earth.

We learn indeed, from the inſtance before us, not raſhly to give up thoſe, who have departed from their religious profeſſions. Their caſe is moſt awful; but we ceaſe to wonder, and we are able to ſuggeſt ſome encouragement, while we are ſtudying theſe

ſacred

ſacred records. We are diſtreſſed, a d almoſt confounded, when we obſerve any, who have zealouſly maintained the cauſe of God, and " ſeemed to be pillars" of his Church, diſgrace their character, and violate their moſt ſolemn engagements. But would you, on this account, reproach the truth of God, which they embraced and defended? Surely your cenſures are unjuſt. The principles of the Goſpel, though ſome deſert them, are not therefore leſs certain, or leſs excellent; and, though in many inſtances they may appear to have failed of their effect, their tendency is to produce a holy practice. We do not, then, vindicate the wrong conduct of thoſe, who have been reputed pious; but we ſeverely condemn it, and warn them, not to deceive their own ſouls or preſumptuouſly reſt on their former high eſtimation among men. Do you aſk, what we conclude reſpecting their ſtate? We anſwer, that we ſtand in doubt of them. Perhaps they have been unſound, throughout: but we would rather ſay, Wait awhile, and the event will declare it. Their paſt profeſſions might be ſincere, though their preſent declenſion be very grievous, and of long continuance; and, by the rich grace of our God, they may yet be effectually recovered, and all their backſlidings healed.

Surely the proud thought will not ariſe in any of our minds, " I am incapable of committing ſuch open and groſs enormities."——" Conſider thyſelf, leſt thou alſo be tempted." You know not, that your " heart is deceitful above all things and deſperately wicked,"

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if you preſume on your own ſtrength. Look at the man after God's own heart, and be aware of danger. What ſecurity have you, which he had not? But his fall may be the means of preſerving you, while you are taught by it to walk humbly, not only under a ſenſe of your continual defects in duty, but through a fear of diſhonouring your profeſſion by ſcandalous immoralities. You will, therefore, be circumſpect in all things, and redouble your importunity in prayer, ſaying with David, "Keep back thy ſervant from preſumptuous ſins*." Thus will you be prepared to reſiſt temptation, while you diſtruſt yourſelves, and ſeek help from God.

But have you departed from the good ways of God, after having been eſtabliſhed in them? Your caſe indeed is moſt melancholy; and, if you are ſincere, you will, probably, ſee the aggravations of your wickedneſs in a ſtronger light, than any other perſons can repreſent. You are ready to conclude, then, "There is no hope." But the inſtance before us will forbid you to deſpair. David's declenſion was, at leaſt, as baſe as your's: yet he was pardoned and reſtored. He beſpeaks your attention, while he ſings aloud of the righteouſneſs of God, by which an acceſs to the throne of His mercy is provided for you†. O return unto him, from whom you have deeply revolted! There is a ſacrifice, which hath virtue ſufficient to expiate all your accumulated guilt. By the application of the blood of Jeſus, you

* Pſal. xix. 13. † Pſal. li. 13, 14.

ſhall

ſhall obtain peace with God, and ſtrength to ſerve Him: nor is there any other method, by which you can be eſtabliſhed in comfort and holineſs again.

" Then," ſays the preſumptuous offender, " there is nothing to be dreaded in the commiſſion of ſin, as it may be ſo eaſily pardoned. I will venture to tranſgreſs; and, after all, my ſtate will be as good, at leaſt as ſafe, as that of the moſt exemplary ſaints. I ſhall repent, and be forgiven."

It will be ſurpriſing, if you be not deceived in your expectations. Are you ſure, that you ſhall have grace to repent? Is God bound to beſtow it? Or, is it a matter of no concern to you, provided you can eſcape eternal puniſhment, that you have ſo long deſpiſed God, diſhonoured His name, and grieved His Spirit? And though you ſhould be delivered from the wrath to come, have you no fears of preſent calamities? It is not true, that, becauſe iniquity is pardoned, and the ſentence of everlaſting condemnation cancelled, no bad conſequences are to be dreaded. It will afterward appear, from David's caſe, that, even where reconciliation is obtained, the Lord " will viſit the tranſgreſſion of his people with the rod, and their iniquity with ſtripes." Repentance and forgiveneſs by no means avert the horrible effects of ſin in this life. For one momentary gratification of a vile luſt, David had many days and years of extreme diſtreſs.

Let us pray, that WE may not prove, by our own melancholy experience, the truth of that denunciation,

nunciation, " The backſlider in heart ſhall be filled with his own ways *."

" Now unto Him, that is able to keep us from falling, and to preſent us faultleſs before the preſence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wiſe God our Saviour, be glory and majeſty, dominion and power, both now and ever!" Amen.

* Prov. xiv. 14.

DAVID.

SECT. 5.

David subdued the Ammonites—distressed by the wickedness of his sons, Amnon and Absalom—fled from Jerusalem, on account of Absalom's conspiracy—cursed by Shimei—sent out an army to oppose Absalom—grieved for his death—recalled to the government—rebelled against by Sheba—slew seven of Saul's descendants—numbered his subjects—punished by a pestilence—prayed and prevailed for Jerusalem—prepared for the building of the temple.

THE extreme depravity of human nature has appeared in the declension of David; and we have seen the grace of God displayed in his pardon and recovery. He had incurred the divine displeasure; but reconciliation was obtained, and, as a token of renewed favour, a son was born to him, named "The beloved of the Lord," to whom the promises were made *. In the midst of judgment, the Lord remembers mercy.

The protection of Providence also was continued to David, notwithstanding his late shameful misconduct. His armies proved victorious, and terminated the war against the Ammonites in a successful manner. He himself attended at the reduction of the royal city, in order to share the triumph, and adorned his own

* 2 Sam. xii. 24, &c.

head

head with the crown of the conquered monarch. The inhabitants were plundered, and placed in a ſtate of loweſt ſervitude, if not deſtroyed by a miſerable death. "He brought forth the people that were therein, and put them under ſaws, and under harrows of iron, and made them paſs through the brick-kiln."——This treatment of his enemies has been rigorouſly cenſured, as an exerciſe of the moſt wanton barbarity. But it has been alleged in his defence, that the original words imply only, he condemned them to certain ſervile employments, at the ſaw, the iron mines, and the brick-kiln*. Or, if uncommon ſeverities were practiſed, who ſhall ſay, that there was not a ſufficient reaſon? Perhaps, the very puniſhments, inflicted upon theſe priſoners of war, had been inflicted by their nation upon the Hebrews and others, and therefore, by the judgment of God, might be appointed for them in return †. If David acted, as it is probable, by a divine commiſſion, ſhall we undertake to blame the proceeding? The Judge of all the earth will ſurely do right. But, be the caſe as it may, the ſentence executed upon the Ammonites cannot be pleaded as a precedent for cruelty, either in private or public concerns; nor will it juſtify any, who are ſeeking the deſtruction of their enemies, from motives of pride or revenge.

Years before Chriſt, about 1032. It was not long before David began to reap the bitter fruits of his fall, and experienced the truth of thoſe awful denunciations, which Nathan had pronounced. "Evil was raiſed up againſt

* See Chandler's life of David, and Letters on Infidelity.
† See the caſe of Adonibezek, Judges, i. 6, 7.

him out of his own houſe." The bad effects of his numerous marriages appeared in many inſtances. The education of his children was neglected, and their perverſe tempers were indulged. Probably, in conſequence of his late offence, notwithſtanding his former example and inſtructions, they were inclined to think more favourably of ſin, and to gratiſy their ſenſual paſſions. This very circumſtance muſt have been an additional diſtreſs to his mind, when he ſaw them hardened through his miſconduct. Alas! we know not, how far the miſchief of one crime may extend.

He was wounded in a very tender part, when he was informed, that his daughter Tamar had been raviſhed by her own brother Amnon *. But how did his anguiſh increaſe, when Amnon, though he had deſerved to die, was treacherouſly killed by another of his children, and that too, by his favourite ſon Abſalom! Thus he beheld lewdneſs and murder introducing the moſt horrid confuſion into his family: and how could he proceed to puniſh thoſe actions, which were an imitation of his own?

Abſalom had fled, "and David mourned for him every day." We fear that the fond father, who had been highly blamable for his former indulgence of him, did not then teſtify, as he ought, his abhorrence of the ſin, which had been committed. Indeed the life of the offender was forfeited to public juſtice. The king was wrong in not executing the ſentence of the law; and therefore God took the matter into his own hand.

* 2 Sam. xiii.

Let

Let parents learn from this instance, as well as from Eli, not to "honour their sons more than God."

David longed for Absalom's return, and very readily consented to his recal: yet, to humble the criminal, and to fix a mark of infamy upon him, he refused to admit him into his presence for two years *. Even then, he was too hasty in receiving him to favour, since the young man discovered no signs of contrition, but evidently appeared insolent and overbearing. Soon afterward, the bad effects of the father's foolish tenderness were felt not by himself only, but throughout the land. We deplore the lenity of many pious persons, who, through an unwillingness to punish their perverse children, are bringing misery upon themselves and their families. They are likely to see the dear objects of their affection run headlong to destruction, and to be repaid for their indulgence, not with their blessing, but their curses.

Years before Christ, 1024. Absalom, by his flattering speeches, stole away the hearts of the king's subjects, and raised so formidable a conspiracy against him, that David thought himself unsafe at Jerusalem, and therefore, together with his household and faithful attendants, fled from his rebellious son †. This was a most painful trial indeed; and yet it seems to have been of a salutary nature. We cannot but admire his entire resignation to the will of God under this severe chastisement. He remembered his own guilt and the sentence passed upon him, and was silent. His conduct may have the appearance of cowardice or unbelief; but we

* 2 Sam. xiv. † 2 Sam. xv.

are taught to aſcribe it to better principles. He "humbled himſelf under the mighty hand of God," ready to ſubmit to his ſtroke, whatever it might be. On this ground, he would not ſuffer the ark and the prieſts to accompany him, though they would have been a comfort to him in his exile; for, conſidering himſelf under the rebuke of God, and therefore unworthy of the outward tokens of His preſence, he ſent them again to Jeruſalem. "Carry back," ſaid he, "the ark of God into the city: if I ſhall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me again, and ſhew me both it and his habitation. But if he thus ſay, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let him do to me what ſeemeth good unto him." And then the king purſued his journey with all the marks of pious and penitential ſorrow. "He went up by the aſcent of mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went barefoot: and all the people, that were with him, covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up."

On every occaſion it becomes a ſinner to be abaſed before his God, and to acknowledge the juſtice of His corrections. But you, whoſe declenſions from a religious profeſſion have emboldened others to ſpeak reproachfully, ſhould, in an eſpecial manner, take ſhame to yourſelves, and bow with deepeſt contrition of heart before Him, whoſe name you have diſhonoured. Through His abundant mercy, indeed, you may hope to be reſtored, and again "find favour in the eyes of the Lord." But, if He ſhould deprive you of your former

former privileges, and thrust you down from your distinguished place in his Church, and determine never more to make use of you, as he has done; still say, "Behold, here am I, let him do to me, as seemeth good unto him." Such was David's unfeigned submission: and Eli, as we have seen, replied to the divine rebuke with the same temper of mind, "It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth him good."

It is no objection to his piety, but rather a strong mark of it, that, when he heard of Ahithophel's treachery against him, he prayed God to turn the counsel of that wicked conspirator into foolishness. For thereby he referred his cause to the righteous decision of the Judge of all, and soon obtained redress. Nor was it wrong to desire Hushai to continue at Jerusalem, for the purpose of sending him information, and promoting his interest there: but his instructions to that officer seem inconsistent with the openness of truth and probity. Religion does not forbid any prudent precautions, though it allows not of fraud or perfidy, for the averting of impending dangers.

In the progress of his flight, fresh trials awaited him. Shimei, a descendant of Saul, who, perhaps, had been disappointed in his expectations of advancement, came out with impious rage to insult the king, and, casting stones at him, poured forth the most dreadful imprecations against him*. It would have been easy for David to have crushed this weak, though furious, adversary in a moment; and he was urged to it by his attendants. But he repressed their zeal in

* 2 Sam. xvi. 5, &c.

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his cause, and, with a singular meekness of spirit, determined to bear the reproaches and the violence of the wretch, from a sense of his own evil desert. He looked beyond the wickedness of the man to the righteous displeasure of God, who thus suffered his enemies to rise against him. He patiently submitted, therefore, to the divine correction, and expected redress from Heaven, saying, "Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him: it may be, that the Lord will look upon mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day."

Such forbearance will probably be condemned as meanness; but herein we perceive and admire the indubitable marks of a real penitent. The sorrow, that "worketh repentance to salvation," while it bows down the soul before God, and stops the mouth from complaining of the heaviest punishment, produces also gentleness and longsuffering towards men: It is the parent of that charity, which "is not easily provoked, and endureth all things." How different from the haughtiness of temper, so much applauded in the world, which is implacable, and cruel, and takes fire at every trifling affront! But, for a perfect pattern of meekness and forgiveness, we look higher than to David, even to his exalted Son, "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again: when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to Him that judgeth righteously." He endured the scoffs, and curses, and violence of the people, and prayed, and died for his very murderers. May "this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus!"

Upon David's flight from Jerusalem, Absalom, having gained possession of the city and the palace, proceeded to the commission of the basest wickedness in defiling his father's concubines; thus executing the divine threatening *, and yet enhancing his own guilt. The king himself narrowly escaped destruction, through Hushai's influence: but, as an attack was meditated upon him by a very powerful army, he was obliged to pass over Jordan with great precipitation †. His dominion appeared to be lost, and his life was in the most imminent danger, from hunger and weariness, as well as from the sword of the proud usurper. But the faithfulness of his God preserved him, and raised him friends to support him. Nor can that gracious promise ever fail; "They, that seek the Lord, shall not want any good thing ‡."

At length it became necessary to make a stand against his rebellious son, who pursued him with hostile rage: and very soon a numerous body was collected, and sent out to oppose him §. David himself prepared for the battle; but the earnest entreaties of his people, who strongly represented to him the miseries which his death might occasion, prevented him from taking the field. He consented, then, to remain behind in Mahanaim, waiting with great anxiety the event of an engagement; and, from his extreme affection for his obdurate child, he seems scarcely to have wished for success. He was blamable, doubtless, in his parental fondness; yet he exhibited a beautiful example of kindness and forgiveness to an enemy, when

* 2 Sam. xii. 11. † 2 Sam. xvii. ‡ Psal. xxxiv. 10.
§ 2 Sam. xviii. 1, &c.

he

he charged the leaders of his forces, "Deal gently for my ſake with the young man, even with Abſalom."

He ſat between the gates of the city, looking with the utmoſt ſolicitude towards the ſcene of action: and, when one meſſenger after another arrived with the tidings of a complete victory, his ſole enquiry was, "Is the young man Abſalom ſafe?" Being informed that the poor unhappy youth had been cut off, he was inconſolable for the loſs. "He was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he ſaid, O my ſon Abſalom, my ſon, my ſon Abſalom: would God I had died for thee, O Abſalom, my ſon, my ſon!" It may be allowed, that the extravagant ſorrow, which the king expreſſed, was highly wrong. He forgot to be thankful for the deliverance vouchſafed to himſelf and the nation, and, inſtead of bowing with ſubmiſſion to the wiſe and righteous deciſion of the Lord, he ſeems to have been carried away by his paſſion. Yet you, who are tried in the perverſeneſs and diſobedience of your children, will not wonder, or be forward to cenſure him. You dread the thought of their being ſuddenly taken away in impenitence, more than any temporal calamities, which can happen to yourſelves: and therefore, that they may have further opportunities of turning to God, and be ſaved from everlaſting perdition, you would wiſh to die a thouſand deaths in their ſtead. Would you, then, avoid the anguiſh which David felt, look well to the ſtate of your affections even toward your beloved offspring; and beware, leſt you pave the way to their ruin both here and for ever,

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by an inordinate attachment to them, or improper indulgence of them. Yet, ſhould you live to ſee them cut off by the juſt judgment of God, though your affliction will be unſpeakably great, it will become you to repreſs your grief, and, while you acknowledge the righteouſneſs of God, to be ſilent in the duſt before Him: for "who art thou, that replieſt againſt Him?" In your own preſervation, and the hopes of forgiveneſs ſtill afforded you, do you not perceive abundant cauſe for gratitude? O praiſe the Lord; that, though one be taken, another is left, and ſay, "It is of His mercies, that WE are not conſumed."

The exceſſive lamentations of David were alſo impolitic, and might have been fatal to his intereſt. The very men, who had fought and conquered for him, were on the point of deſerting him, when they received no thanks for their ſervices, and obſerved that the defeat of the rebel army was bewailed as the heavieſt calamity*. Upon the repreſentation of Joab, however, the king dried up his tears, and, by his public appearance again, conciliated the affections of his ſubjects. It is neceſſary, in every line of life, to conſider what effect our behaviour may produce upon the minds of others; or elſe, our imprudence may cauſe irreparable miſchief. Nor ſhould we be unwilling to liſten to the reproof of an inferior, though conveyed to us in a rough manner.

David was not precipitate in returning to the exerciſe of government, for he waited to be aſſured of the good diſpoſitions of the people toward him. In a lit-

* 2 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

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the time he was recalled by the general voice, and conducted back over Jordan, with numerous attendants, and with all the marks of national honour and efteem. Yet, even in the hour of his triumph, we behold a fingular degree of meeknefs and moderation. Shimei, the profane Benjamite, who had lately treated him with the utmoft indignity and contempt, came with profeffions of penitence to entreat his forgivenefs. The offence was heinous, and David was urged to make him an example of juftice: but he forbore, declaring that his authority was fo perfectly re-eftablifhed, it could not be neceffary to put any man to death; and on this ground he fuffered Shimei to efcape with impunity. Do not our hearts advife, like the fons of Zeruiah, to take vengeance of an enemy? Let us not forget the chriftian precept, "Be not overcome of evil; but overcome evil with good *."

Mephibofheth, the fon of Jonathan, came alfo to offer his congratulations on the king's return. David had conceived of him as a confpirator, from the flanderous accufations of Ziba †, but being now fatisfied of his loyalty, he admitted him again to favour. It requires no little care, to guard againft the falfe and malicious infinuations of talebearers, and no little candour to correct our miftakes.

We are pleafed likewife to obferve the affection and gratitude of David towards the aged Barzillai, who, with an unfhaken attachment and amazing liberality, had fupported him in the time of his diftrefs. Upon their parting from each other, the king kiffed

* Rom. xii. 21. † 2 Sam. xvi. 1—4.

and bleſſed him, and took his ſon with him, to promote him to ſome conſiderable honour. It is but juſtice to recompenſe a benefit received. But alas! does not proſperity ſo intoxicate the mind, that paſt kindneſſes are generally forgotten? Does not a proud and ſupercilious behaviour too commonly characterize thoſe, who poſſeſs any large meaſure of riches and power? We ſhould therefore venerate the man, who, in the midſt of ſucceſs, preſerves an humble, grateful diſpoſition; and, through a diffidence of ourſelves, we ſhould watch and pray againſt temptation, "in all time of our wealth."

The joy, which accompanied David's reſtoration, was interrupted by certain jealouſies and debates between the tribes of Iſrael and that of Judah. There were, even then, diviſions, which afterward occaſioned their total ſeparation. Both ſides were deſirous of notice and precedency, and neither of them willing to make proper conceſſions. How ſeldom is it, that the moſt favourable events are not attended with ſome circumſtances, which damp our pleaſure! And what dreadful miſchiefs proceed from ambition, ſtrife and envy!

Sheba, who was a forward and ſeditious perſon, ſeized the opportunity of blowing up the flames of diſcord between the contending parties, and excited another formidable rebellion *. The Iſraelites, who had profeſſed great zeal for their prince, took up arms againſt him: but they were ſoon recovered to their allegiance, and the inſurrection was cruſhed. What a mercy it

* 2 Sam. xx. 1, &c.

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is, that God preſerves, or reſtores, the peace of ſociety! If the paſſions of men were let looſe, the utmoſt confuſion and miſery muſt enſue.

Years before Chriſt, 1021. David was called to a difficulty of another kind; for he ſaw his ſubjects ſuffering under the preſſure of a grievous famine, during three ſucceſſive years. The Lord God, to whom he ſought for direction and relief, intimated to him, that Saul's oppreſſion of the Gibeonites, in violation of the public faith, had brought down this national judgment upon them*. To make the neceſſary expiation, David yielded to the demand of the Gibeonites; and accordingly, ſeven of Saul's deſcendants fell as a ſacrifice to juſtice.——Whatever opinion we may form of the tranſaction, we muſt, at leaſt, acquit David of malice or reſentment againſt that unhappy family: the execution of the ſentence, probably, was very afflictive to him. Inſtead of charging him with inhumanity in this proceeding, let us ſtand and adore the righteouſneſs of God, who required it. The day is coming, in which the equity of his deciſions will be fully revealed. For the preſent we are aſſured, that his puniſhments deſcend only upon the head of the guilty; and He has taught us, in this inſtance, to beware of ſin, leſt we leave an inheritance of wrath and miſery to our children.

David continued to reign and proſper. The Philiſtines, indeed, ceaſed not to haraſs him as they could; but their various aſſaults afforded ſo many proofs of his martial abilities, or rather, of the Lord's

* 2 Sam. xxi. 1, &c.

 faithfulneſs

faithfulneſs and love to him. On the review of all thoſe ſignal deliverances, which his God had wrought for him, he felt and confeſſed his obligations, and celebrated the divine goodneſs in the moſt elevated ſtrains of devotion: he rejoiced alſo in the proſpect of the much higher advancement of One glorious perſonage among his poſterity, and of the happineſs of the Church under His government*. Let us ſtudy thoſe hymns of praiſe, till our hearts burn within us. Surely the expreſſions of his gratitude and zeal will reproach us for our inſenſibility. How great things has the Lord done for us! He has raiſed up Meſſiah from the ſeed of David; and we participate the benefits of His adminiſtration. Yet what poor tributes of thankfulneſs he has received from our hands! O may the Spirit of his grace, which reſted in ſo large a meaſure upon David, implant all holy affections in us, and ever preſerve them in a lively and vigorous ſtate!

Years before Chriſt, 1017. It is apprehended, that the proſperity, which David and his people enjoyed, proved a ſnare to them. Do not riches and power tend to corrupt the mind, introduce luxury, and give riſe to ambitious projects? Probably, ſome neglect of religious duties had taken place, and ſome ſinful practices been allowed. They had not profited, as they ſhould have done, from the late viſitations of war and famine: and "again the anger of the Lord was kindled againſt Iſrael†." The heart of the king, perhaps, was elated with his ſucceſſes, and with the very flouriſhing

* 2 Sam. xxii. 1, &c. † xxiv. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xxi. 1, &c.

condition

condition of his ſubjects. Satan, who watched the opportunity, ſuggeſted a ſcheme for the gratification of his pride, and tempted him to number Iſrael; inſinuating, it might be, that no prince poſſeſſed larger dominions, or commanded more numerous forces, than he. Ah! what need we have to be upon our guard againſt the ſubtle devices of our grand adverſary: for he knows the temper of our minds, and generally gains an advantage, by ſuiting his propoſals to our wiſhes! And how feeble are the ſtrongeſt believers, when left to his influence!

In one account of this tranſaction, it is aſcribed to God, and in another to Satan. But the ſolution is eaſy. Throughout the ſcriptures, the Lord is ſaid to do that, which He permits to be done. The ſins of men are therefore ſometimes repreſented as proceeding from Him, when, for ſpecial purpoſes, He withdraws whatever might tend to hinder the execution of their wicked projects, and over-rules the event for the accompliſhment of his own deſigns. It is not poſſible that He can infuſe into the minds of his creatures any wrong thought or inclination: but, conſiſtently with his righteous perfections, He may ceaſe to reſtrain the corrupt deſires of our hearts, and may ſuffer them to have their full effect. In this very way he carries on his government over our rebellious world, ſo that even the moſt iniquitous actions form a part of His plan: and yet He continues holy, and juſt, and good. He might have prevented the ſecret ambition of David from breaking forth into any outward act, or defeated the ſtratagems of Satan: but He permitted the ſcheme

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to proceed, in order that the king might be more deeply ſenſible of the evil of his nature, and that, through his perverſeneſs, the people alſo might be puniſhed for their multiplied offences.

David, therefore, commiſſioned Joab to take an exact account of the number of his ſubjects. Whatever might be his motive, whether to indulge a proud curioſity, and to glory in his ſtrength, or to enrol them for his army*, there was ſomething in it ſo manifeſtly wrong, and inconſiſtent with his character, that even Joab remarked it, and earneſtly remonſtrated againſt it; for "the king's word was abominable to him." But, as the Lord had determined to leave him, in this inſtance, to his own devices, and the machinations of Satan, the prince obſtinately perſiſted in his ſcheme. At length, however, his conſcience being rouſed, he was aſhamed and humbled for the folly and wickedneſs of his heart: he felt and confeſſed his guilt, and importunately deprecated the divine wrath. Here, then, we behold him in a moſt diſtreſſed ſituation; we perceive, from his example, the great evil of ſin, and learn to walk circumſpectly in all things.

The prophet Gad went to him, by revelation, to declare Jehovah's diſpleaſure and determination to puniſh him; at the ſame time referring it to his choice, whether he and his people ſhould ſuffer by famine, by war, or by peſtilence. The propoſal was afflictive in every view: but, as the peſtilence muſt proceed immediately from the hand of God, and the king himſelf could no more be ſecured from it than the

* See Biſhop Lowth's notes on Iſa. iv. 3.

meaneſt

meaneſt of his ſubjects, this was preferred. The utmoſt meekneſs, ſubmiſſion, and faith are obſervable in David's anſwer, "I am in a great ſtrait: let us fall now into the hand of the Lord (for his mercies are great), and let me not fall into the hand of man."——The ſin, doubtleſs, was forgiven: but, as it had been of a public nature, the Lord would manifeſt his abhorrence of it before all the nation. Commiſſioned by Him, therefore, the plague inſtantly went forth, and deſtroyed in the different parts of the land, SEVENTY THOUSAND MEN.

The judgment was adapted to the offence. David had been elated with the number of his people; and, to cure him of his fooliſh pride, the Lord effectually convinced him, how ſoon they might be reduced. He can never be at a loſs for means to puniſh his rebellious creatures: in general too, He is pleaſed to ſuit his corrections to their crimes; and accordingly, nothing is more common with Him, than to take away, or imbitter to us, the object, which we value too highly.

Does the chaſtiſement, in the preſent inſtance, ſeem ſevere? We are unfit judges of the meaſures of God's government: we cannot eſtimate the evil of any particular action. In ſome way or another, guilt had been contracted, according to the Lord's declaration and David's own confeſſion: and if only an ambitious thought had been indulged, who ſhall preſume to ſay, that the moſt rigorous inflictions would have been unmerited? For "the wages of ſin is death." On other occaſions the conduct of the king of Iſrael has met

met with unſparing cenſures, and many have wondered, how ſuch complicated iniquity could poſſibly be forgiven: but here, infidelity changes her mode of attack; the offence is conſidered either as nothing, or very trivial; and a ſurpriſe is expreſſed at the cruelty of the Judge. In both caſes, the objection lies againſt God: but He will ſhortly appear to vindicate his own proceedings.

The whole tranſaction is a ſolemn admonition to us, to take good heed to ourſelves. Long experience and high attainments in religion will afford us no ſecurity from temptation, or from the dreadful conſequences of complying with it. We have eſpecial need to beware of pride; for this will aſſault us in various ſhapes even to the laſt. And if we are betrayed into any diſhonourable conduct, we ſhall probably feel the chaſtening rod, and ſmart for our folly.

The people, we have ſeen, were involved in the ſad effects of the tranſgreſſion of their leader. And ſuch is the connection, which ſubſiſts between the different members of ſociety, like that in the natural body, that, if one member ſuffer, ſome others muſt neceſſarily ſuffer with it: in particular, what happens to the head, muſt affect all the parts of the ſyſtem. Is it enquired, how this is to be reconciled with juſtice, that thouſands ſhould be afflicted for the guilt of one? The anſwer in the preſent caſe is obvious: no wrong was done them; for they were evidently puniſhed for their own iniquity, though the offence of David was the immediate occaſion of that deſolating judgment. The Lord God, in order to chaſtiſe a ſinful nation, very frequently

frequently turns the counſels of their rulers into fooliſhneſs.

An Angel, it ſhould ſeem, was employed as an inſtrument of the divine vengeance. And how aſtoniſhing is the ſtrength and activity of theſe ſpiritual Beings, ſince one of them could in a few hours ſpread deſtruction through the land! At laſt, this miniſter of wrath became viſible to David and his elders, who were clothed in ſackcloth: and how terrible the form, how threatening the aſpect! "He ſtood between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn ſword in his hand, ſtretched out over Jeruſalem," and it appeared as if his commiſſion extended to the utter deſolation of that populous city. Then the royal penitent proſtrated himſelf in the duſt, full of anguiſh upon the recollection of his offence; and, while he pleaded for the life of his people, he offered himſelf to the ſtroke of the devouring ſword, that it might be averted from them. "Lo," ſaid he, "I have ſinned, and I have done wickedly: but theſe ſheep, what have they done? Let thine hand, I pray thee, be againſt me, and againſt my father's houſe."

The cry, which proceeds from a truly contrite heart, has power to pierce the heavens. The Lord God looked down with pity upon his ſupplicating ſervant, reverſed the mandate that was gone forth, and ſpared Jeruſalem at his requeſt. He ſaid to the deſtroying Angel, "It is enough: ſtay now thine hand." Directions were then given to David, to erect an altar upon that very ſpot, as a memorial of the awful tranſaction, and of the gracious deliverance vouchſafed. The obedient

dient prince haſtened to fulfil the command, immediately purchaſed the ground, reared an altar, and worſhipped the Lord with coſtly ſacrifices. Thus reconciliation was effected, and the favour of God manifeſted, in anſwer to prayer.

In the very place, which had been ſo highly honoured, David continued to offer up his ſtated ſervices: and there alſo he appointed, doubtleſs by revelation, that the temple ſhould be built*. We are ſtruck with admiration at the zeal of this pious king, and his preparations for the erection of that magnificent edifice, which he himſelf was forbidden to undertake. Materials of every ſort were laid up in readineſs, with amazing pains and expence; though he knew that they could not be made uſe of, till after his deceaſe. He inſtructed, he charged, he encouraged Solomon his ſon to enter upon the work, and to perſevere in it with firmneſs, till the whole ſhould be finiſhed. He commanded the nobles alſo to contribute their utmoſt influence for the completing of this important buſineſs, which he preſſed upon them from a regard to the glory of God, and an aſſured confidence of His gracious preſence and aſſiſtance.

From this view of the hiſtory, ſhall we be at a loſs to aſcertain the true character of David? We allow, that he did not adhere to the rules of righteouſneſs without imperfection or deviation. But we perceive, upon the whole, an integrity and an excellency in his life, which ſtamp an honour upon his name. In the inſtance we have laſt conſidered, what clear marks of

* Deut. xii. 5. 1 Chron. xxii. 1, &c.

penitence

penitence and fervent piety meet us! Let us judge ourſelves by them. We alſo have ſinned in various ways; and perhaps many, in our families or connections, are ſuffering in conſequence of our perverſeneſs or imprudence. Do we mourn before God on this account? Do we cry to Him for pardoning mercy? Are we more ready to condemn ourſelves than others? Are we willing and deſirous, that the effects of our folly may fall entirely upon ourſelves, rather than that any, who have deſerved better at our hands, ſhould be involved in miſery by our means? Let us beware, leſt, while we are cenſuring David, we continue impenitent, and periſh in our ſins. Hear the voice of God, "Repent, and turn yourſelves from all your tranſgreſſions; ſo iniquity ſhall not be your ruin*."

The juſtice of God in taking vengeance has been awfully diſplayed before us. But do we not learn alſo, that "He pardoneth iniquity, and paſſeth by the tranſgreſſion of the remnant of his heritage; that He retaineth not his anger for ever, becauſe He delighteth in mercy†?" We cannot have a ſtronger proof of the efficacy of prayer and interceſſion on the behalf of others, than we have ſeen in David's mediation for Jeruſalem. O let us be encouraged to cry earneſtly to God for our own nation, corrupt and abandoned as it is! We have contributed to the general maſs of guilt: Why are we ſo unconcerned about the conſequence? O let us lie in the duſt, and ceaſe not to lift up our hands with importunate petitions!

* Ezek. xviii. 30. † Mic. vii. 18.

Has deliverance been granted? Has the deſtroying Angel ſheathed his ſword? Then why is not the gracious interpoſition acknowledged? Are ſacrifices of praiſe offered to God on this account? Do we, with overflowing gratitude, record His mercies? What altar have we erected? or what oblations have we preſented to Him? Are we glad to bear our part in advancing the good work of God, though we ſhall not live to ſee it completed? Alas! how many are diſcouraged! How many are careleſs and indolent! How many are worldly and covetous! The difficulty and the expence of this or the other undertaking for the glory of God are common and prevailing objections; ſo that there are few indeed, who will aſſiſt, in any way, to build the temple of the Lord. O for the ſame Spirit, which actuated David, to be poured out upon this generation! "O Lord, revive thy work in the midſt of the years*!"

* Hab. iii. 2.

DAVID.

SECT. 6.

David married Abishag—appointed Solomon his successor—settled the divine service—gave a public and solemn charge to Solomon—praised God—left private directions with Solomon—in his last words, prophesied of the Saviour—died in a good old age.

WE are now advanced, in the course of our meditations, to the close of David's life: a life of uncommon activity and zeal in the cause of God, and of singular utility to his Church. Nor are the last scenes of it the least interesting or instructive. This eminent servant of God will teach us how to die, as well as how to live.

Years before Christ, 1015. Toward the end of his reign his bodily strength seems to have been much impaired. He was, probably, struck with a kind of dead palsy, which made it difficult for him to retain his animal heat*. An expedient was proposed, which we are ready to censure as inconsistent with his wisdom and gravity, but which he adopted in compliance with his physicians. He married the young Abishag, for the necessary purpose of supporting and invigorating his corporeal frame, and not for sensual gratification.

* 1 Kings i. 1, &c.

Whilſt his indiſpoſition unfitted him for public buſineſs, his tranquillity was again diſturbed by the ambition of one of his own children. This, indeed, formed a part of the divine denunciation for his baſe miſconduct: and therefore evil was ſtill "raiſed up againſt him out of his own houſe." It was alſo the conſequence of his ſin in not properly reſtraining the corrupt inclinations of his offspring. The bad effects of this fooliſh tenderneſs had appeared in Abſalom's rebellion. And now, Adonijah, the next in age, and ſimilar in temper to Abſalom, a man of admired beauty, whom his father had never checked or diſpleaſed at any time, aſpired to the throne, and aſſumed the reins of government. The fond parent is generally puniſhed in the ingratitude and oppoſition of thoſe very children, whom he has moſt indulged. For they cannot be influenced by any ſenſe of obligation or duty, who have been accuſtomed to be gratified in every wiſh of their hearts. By how many examples are we taught, that "the rod and reproof give wiſdom; but a child left to himſelf bringeth his mother to ſhame. Correct thy ſon, then, and he ſhall give thee reſt: yea, he ſhall give delight unto thy ſoul*."

Adonijah's attempt, which at firſt appeared formidable, was defeated by the timely interpoſition of the king, who declared it to be the appointment of God, that Solomon ſhould ſucceed to the crown, and commanded proclamation to be made of his immediate admiſſion to the regal office. The people, who held

* Prov. xxix. 15, 17.

David

David in the higheſt veneration, as a prophet of God, inſtantly acquieſced, and received their new governor, with loud demonſtrations of joy, and earneſt prayers for his proſperity. The aged father, alſo, exulted and gave thanks to God, for the completion of the promiſe, which ſecured the throne to Solomon. Doubtleſs the Lord will perform all his counſel, nor can any human oppoſition prevent it. But it is our duty, in expectation of the event, to adopt and vigorouſly purſue thoſe meaſures, which may tend to promote it: and, if our eyes are permitted to ſee the accompliſhment of the divine declarations, our hearts ſhould be ſtirred up to the moſt lively exerciſe of gratitude and praiſe. Can we not, from our own experience, "ſet to our ſeals, that God is true?"

The ſtrength of David was impaired by diſeaſe, as well as by old age: yet, according to his ability, he continued active and inceſſant in his exertions, for the glory of God and the benefit of the Church, even to the laſt. Much had his light ſhined in the former part of his life, but a peculiar ſplendour ſeemed to adorn this bright luminary towards the decline. Neither the infirmities of body, nor the approach of death, foreſeen and felt, damped his ardour, but rather cauſed the flame of holy love and zeal to burn with renewed vigour. Inſtead of being diſcouraged by the thought, that he was quitting his place, and another ready to ſucceed him, he appeared determined to fill up the ſhort period, allotted him, in an honourable manner, and, by his wiſe regulations and earneſt exhortations, to extend his influence even to future ages. How much might be

done for the advancement of religion, and the proſperity of the ſtate, if all were, like David, faithful and diligent, to the utmoſt of their abilities! Do you not refuſe your proper ſervice; and ſatisfy yourſelves with ſome paltry excuſes for your neglect? What, though you ſhould not live to ſee the benefit of your labours, though you are ſoon to lie down in the grave, yet ceaſe not to improve your talents, that others, who ſurvive, may be the better for you; and eſpecially be concerned to leave a favourable teſtimony to the truth of God; and ſo ſhall your name be had in eſtimation, long after your departure.

Perhaps he recovered ſomewhat of his bodily ſtrength; but, however that be, his mind retained its full vigour to the end. We look with reverence on the wiſdom and piety of the Prophet, as well as on the authority of the King, while we obſerve him, with aſtoniſhing care and exactneſs, ſettling the order of the divine ſervice in the temple, and appointing to the various officers their attendance and employment *. The Jewiſh Church reaped the advantage, for many ages. And with gratitude WE commemorate thoſe eminent Reformers in the Chriſtian Church, who were a bleſſing in their own times, and from whoſe zealous exertions we derive the moſt ſolid benefits, even at this day. The Lord has a favour to that people, among whom He raiſes up men of ſuch diſtinguiſhed gifts, of ſuch unſhaken fortitude and unremitting diligence, to plead His cauſe, and to promote the intereſt of religion.

* 1 Chron. xxiii.—xxvii.

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The venerable king, when about to take his leave of the world, aſſembled together the princes, the captains of the army, and the heads of all the nation, that he might publicly declare to them the will of God concerning Solomon's ſucceſſion and the building of the temple, and impreſs his parting admonition upon them with a peculiar ſolemnity and weight*. His addreſs upon that occaſion is an indubitable proof of the ſtrength of his faith, and of his ardent deſires to eſtabliſh the knowledge and the worſhip of God among his ſubjects. He ſtood up before them, not aſſuming the pomp and the ſtate of majeſty, but rather as a preacher of righteouſneſs and as a meſſenger of the Lord; that he might teſtify his own earneſtneſs and fix their attention. He acquainted them with the deſign, which he himſelf had formed, of erecting a magnificent houſe for the adminiſtration of God's ſervice, and with the revelation he had received, over-ruling his purpoſe, deputing Solomon to that work, and promiſing to ſecure the kingdom to his poſterity. He charged them, therefore, to adhere ſteadfaſtly to God, as they expected the continuance of His favour: and then, in the preſence of them all, he called upon Solomon to devote himſelf to this heart-ſearching God, "without partiality and without hypocriſy," and to proceed with faithfulneſs and vigour to the execution of the taſk aſſigned him. For his direction and aſſiſtance, he delivered to him an exact deſcription of the various parts of the temple, as communicated from heaven, and ſupplied him

* 1 Chron. xxviii. and xxix.

with immenſe treaſures for the building and the furniture. Difficult as this undertaking might appear to one ſo young as Solomon, his pious father encouraged him by the conſideration of the divine promiſes, which engaged for his completion of it; and with much energy he requeſted the elders before him to lend their influence and ſupport. Having ſet them the example, he was the more likely to prevail in calling upon them to conſecrate ſome portion of their ſubſtance to the Lord.

The whole company, being inſtantly fired with the ſame holy fervour, contributed with an aſtoniſhing liberality. This was done, " not grudgingly or of neceſſity," but of a ready mind and with great gladneſs of heart, as if they accounted it a privilege to promote the work. The zeal of the people gave freſh animation and delight to their aged monarch, and conſtrained him to break forth, before the numerous aſſembly, into the moſt lively and devout acknowledgments " for the exceeding grace of God in them." He took no praiſe to himſelf; he paid no vain compliments to them, but with pious admiration celebrated the divine goodneſs in putting ſuch an honour upon them. With warmeſt gratitude he bowed before the Lord, adoring Him as the ſupreme, Almighty, ſovereign proprietor of all, and aſcribing to Him both their abundance and their deſire to uſe it for His glory. He was not only thankful for the holy joy, which they then felt, but he poured out his ſoul in ardent ſupplication, that they might be preſerved in the ſame diſpoſition, and never depart from the ſervice of their God.

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In a particular manner he prayed, that Solomon might continue in a faithful adherence to his duty, and execute his truſt with fidelity. Probably, the ſeventy-ſecond pſalm was written for this occaſion. Therein the devout father implored and predicted the bleſſing of God upon his ſon, and with a lively faith looked forward, beyond the proſperous reign of Solomon, to the infinitely ſuperior advantages of the government of Meſſiah, who was to deſcend from his family. He then called upon the whole congregation to join in the worſhip. Accordingly, with one heart and voice they praiſed the Lord God of Iſrael: and, having done this, they expreſſed their reverence alſo for their pious and beloved king. Very numerous ſacrifices were offered to Heaven; a ſacred feſtival was obſerved; Solomon was again anointed to his office; and the regal authority reſigned to him.

The effect of this ſolemnity upon the minds of the people muſt have been great and laſting. They could not, ſurely, but be forcibly impreſſed in favour of religion, when they ſaw ſuch an amiable pattern of it in the moſt exalted ſtation, and heard ſo ſtrong a teſtimony of its reality and excellence from his lips, who was then quitting the world. David had fallen, and diſhonoured the cauſe of God; but he had been ſpared to exhibit full proofs of his recovery; and now eſpecially, at the cloſe of life, after a long courſe of ſteadfaſt obedience, he ſhone brighter than ever.—An example of this kind, in the circumſtances here deſcribed, cannot fail of being a public and an extenſive bleſſing. Who can withſtand its influence?

But how are we ourſelves affected by it? What concluſion do we draw from this tranſaction? Is it for kings and prophets only, to be zealous for God? Are not WE alſo concerned, in our reſpective places, to promote the advancement of truth and righteouſneſs? Particularly, if we are ſoon to reſign our poſt, ſhould we not be anxious to give an open atteſtation of our principles to thoſe, who ſhall ſurvive us? Our friends and relations will then liſten to us with peculiar attention; and our dying behaviour may confirm them in the love and practice of every good word and work. A real regard for the glory of God, and an eager deſire to ſave the ſouls of our fellow-creatures, (the nobleſt motives which can actuate the human heart!) will make us endeavour to extend our influence beyond our own ſhort exiſtence, and add an uncommon force and eloquence to our exhortations in our laſt moments.

Shall we not be ſolicitous for the beſt intereſts of the dear children, who are about to ſtand in our place, and for the continuance of the knowledge of God in our families? The little ſtrength, which ſickneſs or old age may leave us, will be well employed in charging them, by every conſideration, ſteadfaſtly to maintain the profeſſion of true godlineſs, and in praying for their eſtabliſhment and perſeverance.

A magnificent temple was to be raiſed, which called for the moſt liberal exertions of David and his ſubjects. And are there no works of piety, which demand our charitable aſſiſtance? Are we ready, according to our ability, to contribute to the due adminiſtration of

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the divine ordinances, to the ſupport and propagation of the Goſpel? Ah! where is our boaſted love to God, if we determine that our religion ſhall coſt us nothing? It will be to no purpoſe to exhort others "to conſecrate their ſervice to the Lord," if we ourſelves are backward to do the ſame. Our own example will be the moſt perſuaſive argument to enforce the duty. While we are "ready to diſtribute, willing to communicate," many around us, who are witneſſes of our ardour, may catch the holy fire, and unite their zealous endeavours to promote the honour of God. But let us render the ſacrifice of a devoted heart, not from conſtraint, but "becauſe we have ſet our affection to the houſe of our God." Nor let any preſume to make an oſtentatious diſplay of their liberality, as if they had a meritorious claim to the divine favour. For "who hath firſt given to Him, and it ſhall be recompenſed unto him again?" Learn from David to bow with deepeſt humiliation before the Lord of Hoſts, to lay your ſervices at His feet, and to aſcribe it to His diſtinguiſhing mercy, that you poſſeſs the deſire, as well as the ability, to be uſeful. In this way only, your offerings will be acceptable. You ſhould ſay, then, "Of him, and through him, and to him are all things*." You ſhould alſo rejoice to ſee others brought under the influence of the ſame grace: every ſuch inſtance ſhould fill your ſoul with admiring gratitude to God, who is pleaſed to take out of our apoſtate race "a people for his name." O let us pray, that He would confirm the thing that He has

* Rom. xi. 35, 36.

wrought,

wrought, and "keep it for ever in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of his people, and prepare their heart unto himſelf!"

When David more evidently perceived his diſſolution approaching, ſtill anxious for the proſperity of Iſrael, he preſſed upon his ſon Solomon, in private, a ſerious and fixed attention to religion and to the important duties of his ſtation, as the only way, in which he could expect the continuance of the Lord's favour *. He gave him alſo ſome directions, of political expediency, for the regulation of his conduct toward certain perſons, who would be near him. He recommended to his friendſhip and patronage the ſons of Barzillai, in grateful remembrance of the kindneſs he had received from that family. But he warned him of Joab, as a dangerous and impious character, and charged him to puniſh that inſolent, murderous, and diſaffected leader of his armies, who had long deſerved to die for his numerous crimes, and whom David himſelf had ſpared through a blamable timidity. Shimei was alſo pointed out to him as a profane wretch, who could not be truſted, and who had merited the ſevereſt vengeance for curſing the king in the day of his calamity. David, indeed, had promiſed with an oath not to put the laſt offender to death; but his ſucceſſor was not bound by that promiſe. Probably, Shimei continued to manifeſt a ſeditious ſpirit, which might make it neceſſary for the ſecurity of government to watch his movements, and which, David might foreſee, would ſoon give occaſion to "bring down his hoary head to the grave

* 1 Kings ii. 1, &c.

with

with blood." This was in fact the case, as the following reign will inform us.

Such a representation of the matter, which is fair and consistent, will sufficiently obviate the charge, that David in his dying moments evinced a malevolent, sanguinary, and revengeful disposition. Nothing more can properly be drawn from the history, than that he was influenced by a regard to national justice and the welfare of the people, whom he was then leaving in trust with an inexperienced youth. Various commands and actions are expedient, and even necessary in a magistrate, which in a private person might be condemned as cruel and malicious. Unless we could discern the inward principles of those, who are placed in a public station, we are very incompetent to decide on many parts of their conduct. "Let every man prove his own work;" and let those, who are forward to censure the king of Israel, not dare to justify what is evidently wrong in their own tempers or practice, but "judge themselves, that they be not judged of the Lord."

If we would form a fair opinion of this man of God in the close of life, we should accompany him at that solemn season, when he is said to have uttered his "last words *." His dying sentiments are recorded; and they were delivered under the immediate and powerful influence of the Holy Ghost. Not ashamed of his mean original, he commemorated the divine goodness, which took him from an obscure family, and fixed him in a most distinguished rank, both in the

* 2 Sam. xxiii. 1—7.

Church

Church and State. "He was raiſed up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the ſweet Pſalmiſt of Iſrael." For he had been employed, not only in the affairs of government, but in providing ſacred ſongs for the public ſervice of the temple. He ſuſtained the character of a Prophet as well as of a Prince; and therefore he aſſerted, that he had been favoured with remarkable communications from heaven, and had declared only what the Spirit of the Lord revealed to him. On one particular ſubject the Lord God had given him the cleareſt information, diſcovering to him the dignity, the offices, the ſalvation of that glorious Perſonage, the Meſſiah, whoſe coming he then predicted, and from whom he profeſſed to derive all his comforts, and expectations*. He repreſented this exalted Deliverer, as the King of Zion, who ſhould "judge the world in righteouſneſs," "the Juſt One, ruling in the fear of God," or bringing men to a ſtate of holy obedience, He deſcribed the effect of His appearance by the enlivening influence of the ſun, which with its unequalled ſplendour diſperſes the darkneſs, and cheers univerſal nature; and by the renovation of the face of the earth, which the refreſhing ſhowers produce in a dry ſeaſon. The venerable prophet, therefore, fixed his laſt and moſt earneſt regard on the Saviour, rejoicing in the grace, which is treaſured up in Him, and which is ſecured by the ſtrongeſt

* The paſſage has been generally allowed to be a full and expreſs prophecy of the Saviour; and this explanation has been ably vindicated by Biſhop Chandler, in his Defence of Chriſtianity, page 235.

and

and moſt inviolable engagements of God himſelf. He experienced much diſtreſs from his children, and probably foreſaw dreadful confuſion among his poſterity: yet he teſtified his firm confidence, that the Lord would not withdraw his kindneſs from him, but fulfil that everlaſting Covenant, of which he had been permitted to partake. Of this Covenant, as the baſis of all intercourſe between God and ſinners, he expreſſed his high eſteem, declaring it to be complete and unalterable, the ground of all his dependence, and the object of his warmeſt affections. It is "ordered in all things, and ſure," ſaid the dying ſaint; "it is all my ſalvation, and all my deſire." His hopes might ſeem to be checked by the very ſlow progreſs he had made in the divine life, or by the diſtance of time, through which he looked to the incarnation of the Redeemer: yet a belief of the faithfulneſs and love of God diſperſed his fears*. He concluded his teſtimony with a deſcription of the character and deſtruction of ungodly men. He had ſeen his own throne eſtabliſhed; and he was confident that the kingdom of Jeſus muſt proſper, in ſpite of all oppoſition. Such as refuſe to ſubmit are "ſons of Belial," worthleſs and vexatious, like the thorns, which are caſt away, fit only to be burned: and the fire of the wrath of God awaits them.

* "Although he make it not to grow," v. 5, may be underſtood in either of theſe ſenſes; the grace of the Covenant had not been in a vigorous ſtate within him; or "the Meſſenger and Surety of the Covenant" was not ſoon to appear.

Here,

Here, then, we have a decided proof, that he died under the influence of the Holy Ghost, in an exercise of faith and hope, the most glorious that can be conceived. To such cases as this we are not afraid to appeal, for a full attestation of the reality and excellence of religion. It is no "cunningly devised fable" of impostors, no pleasing dream of visionaries and enthusiasts. There is that in it, which can take away every bitter ingredient in affliction, and inspire confidence and joy in the near prospect of death and eternity. Is this blessedness what we have attained? Can we meet our last enemy with the same tranquillity and courage? We feel the approaches of our dissolution: do we not enquire, What will support us in it? What will enable us to triumph over it?

We shall learn from the king of Israel, that no elevation of rank, no outward splendour will then bear up the mind; nor will the recollection of the most eminent services, we have performed, be a firm ground of reliance: but the knowledge of the Son of God, and a clear view of our interest in "the everlasting Covenant" will make us more than conquerors. What should cast down the Believer? Not his personal, nor his domestic troubles, not even his shame and distress for his misconduct and declensions. Let the merciful engagements of God in Christ be properly apprehended and rested in, and it will be no presumption for him to rejoice. Have we, then, considered the Saviour, according to this exalted description of him? Are we convinced of the equity of his government, and become his obedient subjects? Have we felt the cheering

cheering beams of this "Sun of Righteoufnefs?" Have the refrefhing fhowers of his grace given life and vigour to our fouls? He, to whom David looked forward through a period of a thoufand years, has now appeared, and "confirmed the Covenant." Can unbelief itfelf require a ftronger bafis of hope and expectation? Have we "taken hold of this Covenant?" How, then, do we efteem it? Do we admire it, as "ordered in all things," "perfect and entire, wanting nothing?" And can we credit its promifes, as "fure?" Is this our whole dependence towards God? And is it the defire of our hearts, that we may continue to enjoy its bleffings upon earth, and obtain the completion of them in heaven? This would be indeed to refemble the dying Patriarch. But how numerous are "the fons of Belial!" O fear to be found in the company of thofe, who are difaffected to the interefts of the Prince of peace. Ah! what aggravated ruin awaits them! Their violent tempers may now threaten to wound thofe who fhall refift them, like the fharp-pointed thorns; but the executioners of the divine vengeance fhall be fufficiently armed to deftroy them, and fhall "bind them in bundles to burn them."

This eminent fervant of God, we have feen, had been obfcured by many a dark cloud, but at laft his fun went down with uncommon fplendour. "He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour*." "After he had ferved his own generation by the will of

* 1 Chron. xxix. 28.

God,

God, he fell on ſleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and ſaw corruption*." In his life he had been actuated by an uniform regard to the will and the glory of God, while he ſtudied to promote the beſt intereſts of his people; and his end was in peace: the good man cloſed his day of labour with compoſure and ſerenity, juſt as the wearied go to reſt. Great and uſeful as he had been, he was not exempted from the ſtroke of death; but, like all his fathers before him, he experienced the original ſentence againſt ſin, " Duſt thou art, and unto duſt ſhalt thou return." Such is the concluſion of all human grandeur. Kings as well as beggars muſt lie down in the grave, and ſee corruption. Let us not covet thoſe envied diſtinctions, which we muſt ſoon reſign, but ſeek for that true excellency of character, which alone will accompany us into the eternal world. Let us turn from the conſideration of David to a ſerious examination of ourſelves. Are we ſerving God in our generation, as this illuſtrious Prophet did? Or have we the ſame bleſſed confidence, that we ſhall " behold the face of God in righteouſneſs, and be ſatisfied, when we awake with His likeneſs†?" The time of our departure cannot be far diſtant. May we " give diligence to make our calling and election ſure, and count not our lives dear unto us, ſo that we may finiſh our courſe with joy, and receive the promiſe of eternal inheritance, among the ſaints in light!" Amen.

* Acts xiii. 36. † Pſal. xvii. 15.

DAVID A TYPE OF CHRIST.

SECT. 7.

David, a preacher and inspired writer—his psalms, predictions of Christ—his imprecations—considered as a type of Messiah, who was called by the same name, and born in the same town—a shepherd—appointed of God to the kingdom—long opposed—reproached and persecuted—under spiritual desertion—head of the heathen, as well as of all Israel—ruled in righteousness—regulated the divine service—pardoned enemies, and punished the obstinately rebellious—confirmed in the kingdom by Covenant—yet far inferior to the Saviour.

The life and character of David are of such peculiar eminence in the sacred writings, that they demand a large share of attention in these practical observations. It will appear, that he was much honoured of God, if we remark the very high exaltation to which he rose, the continual protection and support he received from heaven, and the extensive conquests and dominion bestowed upon him. Nor did these constitute his chief glory: we admire the exceeding grace of God in his spiritual attainments; and when we consider the depth of his contrition, the strength of his faith, the fervour of his love, the activity of his obedience, we are not afraid to assert, that, in this sense,

"he found favour before God," and was "a man after his own heart*."

In another view also, we look up to him with veneration, as a preacher of righteousness, a prophet of the Lord, and one of the inspired authors of the holy scriptures. His poetical compositions evince the sublimity of his genius: but they are to be regarded as superior to the productions of mere human abilities; for they are "the word of God:" it was "the Holy Ghost, who spake by the mouth of David†." These divine hymns were intended, not for instruction only, but as models of prayer and praise for the Church in all ages, to assist us in our private addresses to God, and to enliven our public devotions. Many things, indeed, will be found in them, as might be expected, unsuitable to our case, since our circumstances widely differ from his. But they exhibit an excellency of character, which we should study to imitate. Perhaps, their principal recommendation is, that they contain such glorious predictions concerning the Saviour of the world. Some have thought, that they all have a reference to Christ; but, not to insist on this opinion, a large part of them confessedly belong to Him. Even where there must be a literal application to David, we are compelled to seek for a much nobler sense, and to fix our regard on the great Redeemer.

The psalms describe, more clearly than any other portion of the old testament, Him who was to come, "the consolation of Israel." There we perceive the

* Acts vii. 46. xiii. 22. † Acts i. 16.

high

high dignity and myſterious perſon of Chriſt, who is David's Lord as well as David's Son, and who, as the ſupreme God, demands the love, truſt, and worſhip of his people. We learn what offices He ſuſtains for them, and behold him as their Prophet, Prieſt, and King, their Shepherd, Huſband, Leader, and Interceſſor. We view him in all the different ſtages of his humiliation, aſſuming our nature, making his abode on the earth in circumſtances of unparalleled meanneſs, contempt, perſecution, and miſery, and at laſt cloſing his ſuffering life by an ignominious and painful death. The very manner, in which he was to be betrayed, mocked, ſcourged, crucified, is pointed out with an aſtoniſhing exactneſs. We hear the deriſions of his enemies, and his own heavy complaints, when he was hanging on the croſs. We are led with him to the grave; but we alſo obſerve him riſing from the dead, before he ſaw corruption. His return to the higheſt heavens, with a complete triumph over the powers of darkneſs, is accurately deſcribed; and we are warned to look for his ſecond advent, when He ſhall judge the world in righteouſneſs.

What a chain of connected and valuable prophecy is here! Shall we not praiſe the condeſcenſion of our God, in giving ſuch clear information of the grace of the Goſpel to his ſervant David, and in preſerving theſe holy records for the confirming of our faith and enlivening of our hope? O let us ſtudy the pſalms with an eſpecial regard to Chriſt, that we may view the Saviour there! And, while we read them upon our

knees, let us pray for "the Spirit of wiſdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."

But, though David appears to have been elevated in his devotions, and favoured with remarkable diſcoveries of the character, the work, the ſufferings, and the glory of the Redeemer, it is objected, that he poſſeſſed a bitter and implacable ſpirit againſt his oppoſers; and the imprecations, contained in his own poetical compoſitions, are adduced in ſupport of the charge. This is an important ſubject; but our plan will neither require nor permit us to conſider it at large. Yet ſome things may be ſuggeſted in reply. It cannot be ſaid, ſurely, that the preceding hiſtory exhibits him as a man of a ſanguinary, vindictive temper. How many proofs are given to the contrary! Nay, we may venture to appeal to various paſſages of the pſalms themſelves, for an undeniable teſtimony of his compaſſion, lenity, and forgiveneſs towards the moſt injurious and murderous enemies. Theſe obſervations ſhould lead us to a more favourable conſtruction of ſuch parts, as wear a different aſpect. There are other ſolid reaſons, which incline us ſo to interpret the maledictions in queſtion, as to vindicate the moral character of David.

The Lord God himſelf preſided as the chief magiſtrate, in the adminiſtration of the Jewiſh government, which has therefore been called a THEOCRACY. To Him the injured ſubject was taught to look up for redreſs, and from Him the obſtinately rebellious were warned to expect condign puniſhment. In this view, then, David might appeal to God, entreating Him to determine the equity of his cauſe by inflicting the

threatened penalty on his enemies. This at leaſt will juſtify many of thoſe places, in which he appears to pour forth bitter curſes. Thus he cried in his diſtreſs, "Hear the right, O Lord, attend unto my cry, give ear unto my prayer that goeth not out of feigned lips. Let my ſentence come forth from thy preſence: let thine eyes behold the things that are equal *."

It has often been urged, that, by ſuppoſing a change in the mode of ſpeech, which is uſual in the Hebrew language †, the imprecations are no other than predictions of evil. The moſt calamitous events, then, which ſeem to be deſired and prayed for, may be only foretold as about to happen: and when it is ſaid, "Let it be thus done," it may be fairly tranſlated, at leaſt in many places, "It ſhall be ſo accompliſhed." Such declarations do not imply, that the ſpeaker or the writer really wiſhed for thoſe events, or felt any impatience, malice, or revenge. Otherwiſe, we muſt charge theſe deteſtable tempers upon the moſt holy men, at the very time when the Spirit of God reſted on them in an eminent degree. They uttered what was agreeable to His will, and by that particular form of ſpeech might deſign to teſtify their obedient acquieſcence in it, even though extremely afflictive to themſelves. Let it be allowed, then, that David, as a prophet, wrote under the divine inſpiration, and all objections againſt his moſt tremendous curſes muſt be removed. For who are we, that we ſhould preſume

* Pſal. xvii. 1, 2.

† By the figure Enallage, the imperative mood may be uſed for the future tenſe of the indicative.

to cavil with the denunciations of Jehovah?——It is evident, that this is a fair ſtatement of the caſe, becauſe ſome of the moſt offenſive paſſages in the pſalms are in the new teſtament aſcribed to the Holy Ghoſt. Compare Pſal. lxix. 25, and cix. 8, with Acts, i. 16, 20.——Theſe imprecations, therefore, cannot be pleaded in defence of angry and malicious words, ſince they are no patterns for our imitation, being delivered on extraordinary occaſions, and by One ſuſtaining an extraordinary character.

In many of them, the Lord Jeſus Chriſt, the promiſed Meſſiah, is the chief ſpeaker; and He himſelf, as the ſupreme and righteous Judge, paſſes ſentence on his enemies, and demands their deſtruction. Thus it is He, rather than David, who ſays concerning thoſe, who "gave him gall for his meat and in his thirſt gave him vinegar to drink," "Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them:" "Let this be the reward of mine adverſaries from the Lord, and of them that ſpeak evil of my ſoul *." And ſhall we dare to quarrel with his deciſions? It becomes us to confeſs their equity, "Even ſo, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments † !"

It is certain, that David was an eminent type of Chriſt; and that he frequently ſpake, as concerning himſelf, what was applicable only to the great antitype. This obſervation, which is not controverted, opens a new field of enquiry. It would, indeed, be contrary to our plan, to enter largely into it; but, as the ſub-

* Pſal. lxix. 21, 24. cix. 20. † Rev. xvi. 7.

ject is highly interesting, and as it may tend to illustrate many passages in the psalms and prophecies, we cannot wholly pass it by. May we discover more of the glory and grace of our Redeemer from every fresh representation of him; and, while we are looking at the figure, may we perceive and admire the excellency of the divine Original!

In the old testament the Messiah is pointed out to us by the name of David, not merely because it was designed, that in his human nature he should descend from the same family, but because he should resemble that illustrious Progenitor. The blessings of redemption are therefore called "the sure mercies of David*." For the same reason also, long after that Prince was laid in the dust, it was declared, that the nation should be recovered from their captivity, and "serve the Lord their God and DAVID their King†." The new testament, which is careful to assert the completion of the old, introduces to our view the glorious Personage promised to the Jews, as the son and successor of their ancient ruler. Thus the Angel Gabriel announces his approach, "The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David‡."

We shall enquire, then, briefly, of what sort this typical resemblance is, and what instruction we may derive from it. We shall not, indeed, insist on every instance of likeness, which a fruitful fancy might imagine, but touch only on those points, which are clear and generally allowed. It might seem too trifling

* Isa. lv. 3. † Jer. xxx. 9. Ezek. xxxiv. 23, 24. xxxvii. 24, 25. Hos. iii. 5. ‡ Luke, i. 32.

to mention, that the very ſame place, the town of Bethlehem, gave birth to " the offspring of David," as well as to the diſtinguiſhed anceſtor. But even this circumſtance was the ſubject of an expreſs prophecy, and effected by a very ſingular interpoſition of Providence*. Perhaps, alſo, it deſerves our notice, that David in his original employment as a ſhepherd, prefigured the Saviour, For while he ſlew the lion and the bear, in the defence of his flock †, he exhibited a ſtriking repreſentation of " the good ſhepherd," who fleeth not when he ſeeth the wolf coming, nor leaveth the ſheep to his aſſaults, but, rather than one of them ſhould periſh, layeth down his life for them ‡. How great is His condeſcenſion, in undertaking their cauſe! How perfect their ſecurity, who confide in His care!

The ſon of Jeſſe was appointed of God to his high office, and conſecrated to it with the holy oil. The caſe of our exalted Leader is the ſame. Though, in his external appearance, mean " as a root out of a dry ground," He was ſet apart for his work in the counſels of Heaven from eternity, " choſen of God," conſecrated by the Spirit, and thus " anointed with the oil of gladneſs above his fellows §." Such is the deſcription given of him by the Father, who demands our attention to him on this ground ‖. Herein we perceive the eminent qualifications of " Meſſiah the Prince," and admire the harmony of the three Perſons, concerting and accompliſhing the plan of Redemption.

* Mic. v. 2. Luke, ii. 1,——6. † 1 Sam. xvii. 36.
‡ John, x, 11—15. § Pſal. xlv. 7. ‖ Iſa, xlii. 1.

We

We confeſs our obligations to obey Him, who comes to reign over us; "for Him hath God the Father ſealed *."

David was deſigned for the kingdom, and the decree, to eſtabliſh him in it, was publiſhed many years before he received the full poſſeſſion. He had to paſs through a ſeries of painful and complicated trials, in order to attain the promiſe. Thus alſo the acceſſion of Jeſus to the dominion intended for him was long oppoſed. Though the Lord God had declared his fixed determination, to "ſet his King upon his holy hill of Zion †," He choſe to permit various attempts, repugnant to his purpoſe, and "to make the Captain of our ſalvation perfect through ſufferings ‡." The man after God's own heart is exhibited, through a conſiderable portion of his life, in a ſtate of reproach, perſecution, and diſtreſs. But all compariſon fails, when we advert to the caſe of Him, who in his humiliation was more afflicted than any other, "a man of ſorrows, and acquainted with grief §." Yet a ſimilitude in certain points muſt be allowed.

The expectations of David probably expoſed him to many envious cenſures. His own kindred, in particular, reviled him, as acting from ambitious views and other corrupt principles. When firſt he diſcovered his eminent abilities, "I know thy pride, and the naughtineſs of thy heart," was the ſlanderous and cruel ſpeech of his elder brother ‖. We remember Jeſus alſo, coming under the very ſame malicious charges

* John, vi. 27. † Pſal. ii. 6. ‡ Heb. ii. 10. § Iſa. liii. 3.
‖ 1 Sam. xvii. 28.

from

from his near relations according to the flesh. When his divine power was manifested in his miracles, they suggested, that he courted the public notice, and aimed at popularity, "seeking to be known openly." "If thou do these things," said they, "shew thyself to the world." "For neither did his brethren believe in him *." Shall the followers of Christ, then, wonder or stagger in their minds, when they meet with sneers and contempt? "If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household †?" Nay, we are taught to expect this very treatment from those, with whom we are most intimately connected ‡.

In the very long persecution, which David endured from the rage and tyranny of Saul, we perceive a resemblance of "the holy child Jesus, against whom both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together §." He, whom the Lord intended to set upon the throne of Israel was obliged to fly for his life from place to place, and to hide himself in the dens and caves of the earth; so that, to appearance, he was often on the very point of perishing. Herein he represented the glorious Person, to whom the universal kingdom belongs. For He also wandered from town to town, and very frequently, to avoid the violence of his adversaries, concealed himself from them, and escaped from their fury, only by a miraculous flight ‖. Ah! who shall dare to

* John, vii. 3—5. † Matt, x. 25. ‡ x. 36. § Acts, iv. 27. ‖ Luke, iv. 30. John, viii 59. x. 39.

complain

complain of outward tribulations, with ſuch examples as theſe before his eyes?

The ground of the oppoſition was the ſame in both caſes; an apprehenſion, that the eſtabliſhed government was in danger. Saul conſidered the ſon of Jeſſe as his rival: Herod alſo ſuſpected, that his power would be ſubverted by Him, "who was born king of the Jews *;" and there were thoſe who ſuggeſted to Pilate, that the claims of Jeſus would effectually ruin the intereſts of the Roman Emperors †. The concluſion in each inſtance was falſe and invidious. And let not holy men in any age or country be ſurpriſed, if their deſigns be miſrepreſented in the very ſame way, and they be reproached as "troublers of Iſrael," or as "turning the world upſide down ‡."

David alſo met with formidable reſiſtance from other quarters. Not to mention the hoſtile attempts of the Philiſtines, the Ammonites, and the Syrians, it will be recollected that his own nation remained for a long time diſaffected towards him, and ſeemed ready to join in every conſpiracy and rebellion againſt him. Some, who had profeſſed a ſtrong attachment to him, forſook his cauſe; and One in particular, who had been a partner of his counſels, and his familiar companion, proved a traitor, and ſought his deſtruction. Theſe were painful circumſtances indeed. But they exhibit, though in a faint manner, the oppoſition againſt Meſſiah. Not only have the Gentiles been averſe to His government, but when "he came unto his own, his

* Matt. ii. 2, &c. † John, xix. 12. ‡ 1 Kings, xviii. 17. Acts, xvii. 6.

own

own received him not *." His citizens hated him, and ſent a meſſage after him, ſaying, " We will not have this man to reign over us †." A murderer was preferred to the Prince of life; and " Not this man, but Barabbas," was the general cry ‡. Many, who had favoured him, exclaimed, " Crucify him, crucify him." Even his ſelect company of friends did not continue ſteadfaſt, but fled from him §. One eſpecially who had been a near attendant upon his perſon, entruſted with his counſels, of a character exactly ſimilar to that of Ahitophel, a baſe apoſtate, betrayed him into the hands of his enemies ‖. It will not be overlooked, that the execrable wickedneſs of Judas is deſcribed, and his awful ſentence denounced, in thoſe very pſalms, which might be originally compoſed with a reference to Ahitophel ¶. We admire the meekneſs and ſubmiſſion of David in his deepeſt afflictions; but Jeſus, more than any other example, will teach us to " poſſeſs our ſouls in patience," and to ſay, " The cup which my father hath given me, ſhall I not drink it ** ?" Ah! how little have we learned to ſuffer as becometh Chriſtians!

David received, in ſome of his heavieſt trials, a large meaſure of divine conſolations. But there were ſeaſons of darkneſs, in which his ſoul was diſmayed, when he complained unto God, as one utterly abandoned and abhorred. We behold the Saviour alſo, though ever dear to God, under ſpiritual deſertion, and overwhelmed with the dread of his Father's wrath.

* John, i. 11. † Luke, xix. 14. ‡ John xviii. 40.
§ Matt. xxvi. 56. ‖ xxvi. 14, 48. ¶ Pſal. lxix. and cix.
** John, xviii. 11.

In

In that moſt tremendous ſituation, the Son of David cried out in the words of his progenitor, "My God, my God, why haſt thou forſaken me*?" The children of God may ſometimes be in a ſimilar caſe, and adopt the ſame expreſſions of diſtreſs. But both theſe inſtances will inſtruct us, that, though "weeping may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning †." Let us look to the end, nor refuſe to "ſuffer with Jeſus, that we may be alſo glorified together."

David was a man of war, and the leader of the armies of Iſrael. He ſtood forth as an undaunted champion in their cauſe, and conducted them from one glorious conqueſt to another. He alone dared to enter the liſts, and maintain a ſingle combat againſt the proud Goliath. Not indeed by human means, or by mere ſtrength of arm, but "in the name of the Lord," He fought, overcame, and deſtroyed the inſulting foe. At length he ſaw the perſecuting Saul removed, the Philiſtines ſubdued, and all the neighbouring nations either deſolated, or made tributary to him. Thoſe, who had preſumed to conſpire againſt him, were utterly defeated, and covered with confuſion. Thus, "after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promiſe," and poſſeſſed a very extenſive dominion. He was conſtituted ſupreme governor of all the tribes of Iſrael, and, in a ſenſe alſo, "the head of the heathen ‡," ſince many of them profeſſed allegiance to him.

Such was the type, which exhibits a manifeſt reſemblance of Him, who "is given for a Leader and

* Pſal. xxii. 1. Matt. xxvii. 46. † Pſal. xxx. 5. ‡ xviii. 43.

Commander,"

Commander" to all the ſpiritual Iſrael. He is, above all others, " ſtrong and mighty in battle." He has lifted up an enſign to the people, and encouraged all his faithful ſoldiers with this aſſurance, that he will go before them, and fight for them. He has undertaken with his own arm to ſubdue the proud uſurper, who threatens and terrifies the hoſts of Iſrael. He has alſo prevailed againſt him; for " through death He has deſtroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the Devil *." We rejoice in the victory, and believe that " the God of peace will bruiſe Satan under OUR feet ſhortly †."

No reſiſtance could poſſibly prevent the Saviour from taking poſſeſſion of his kingdom. The united efforts of Jews and Gentiles did not defeat, but promote his deſign. Even in his croſs, he triumphed over all the ſchemes of earth and hell; and his loweſt humiliation prepared the way for his higheſt advancement. Juſt before his aſcenſion to glory, he ſaid, " All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth ‡." The Father hath " ſet him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but alſo in that which is to come §." As yet, indeed, his ſpiritual government has not attained its utmoſt extent and perfection; for it is in a ſtate of gradual increaſe and improvement. Many refuſe ſubmiſſion to his yoke. But " his people ſhall be willing in the

* Heb. ii. 14. † Rom. xvi. 20. ‡ Matt. xxviii. 18.
§ Eph. i. 20, 21.

day

day of his power*;" "yea, all kings ſhall fall down before him; all nations ſhall ſerve him†." For "he muſt reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet‡." This is that "root of Jeſſe, which ſhall riſe to reign over the Gentiles: in Him ſhall the Gentiles truſt§." The rebellious Jews, who ſtill perſiſt in their diſaffection to him, ſhall ſoon throw down their arms, ſhall ſue for mercy, and be ſubjected to his authority. O let us pray for the further progreſs of this kingdom! "Gird thy ſword upon thy thigh, O moſt mighty; with thy glory and thy majeſty: And in thy majeſty ride proſperouſly ||."

David's regal character is allowed to have been juſt and upright: and the beneficial effects of his government were felt through every part of the nation ¶. From this view of the compariſon, alſo, "let the children of Zion be joyful in their king." All his diſpenſations are like himſelf, "holy, and juſt, and good." His ſubjects, therefore, will derive the moſt valuable bleſſings from a cordial and unreſerved ſubmiſſion to him. Should they diſlike his appointments, or wiſh to be excuſed from obedience, they would, at the ſame time, be enemies to their own intereſt. You, then, who complain of his conduct towards you, or cenſure his commands as too ſtrict and ſevere, underſtand neither the excellency of his adminiſtration, nor the nature of real happineſs. We entreat you to bow down to our Jeſus; for in him is the prophecy fulfilled: "Behold, the days come, ſaith the Lord, that I will

* Pſal. cx. 3. † lxxii. 11. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 25. § Rom. xv. 12. || Pſal. xlv. 3, 4. ¶ 2 Sam. viii. 15. Pſal. lxxviii. 72.

raiſe

raise unto David a righteous branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name, whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS *."

We have seen the attention of David to the divine service. He fixed the due order of the Priests and Levites in their offices, and gave directions for the regular observance of the sacred ordinances. And do we not perceive and admire, in our illustrious Head, a similar care to promote the comfort and prosperity of his Church? He requires our serious regard to his own positive institutions, which He has appointed "for the perfecting of the saints." To Him, therefore, we are taught to look, as to the great "master of assemblies," and, in obedience to Him, we sanctify his day, we frequent his house, we celebrate his sacraments, we reverence his faithful ministers, and listen to "the word of reconciliation." We rejoice also, in the expectation of his presence and blessing; for he has said, "Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world †."

David has exhibited an amiable pattern in the forgiveness of his most violent opposers. But, though he wished not their destruction, their continued disaffection made it necessary to inflict the severest punishments. Such also is the government of Jesus. He "desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live." He weeps

* Jer. xxiii. 5, 6. † Matt. xxviii. 20.

over

over the most obdurate, entreats them to be reconciled, and offers them a full and free pardon, upon their unfeigned submission to him. But let not the rebellious, who persist in their contempt of him, presume upon impunity. "His enemies shall lick the dust: He will destroy them that hate him: He will break them with a rod of iron: He will dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." How forcible, then, is the application to every one of us, "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him *."

The Lord God established the covenant of royalty with David, and, by express promise, ensured to his family the possession of the throne of Judah †. This was emblematical of "the everlasting Covenant," which the Father has been pleased to make with his Son Jesus Christ, for the perpetuity of His kingdom through all generations. Such is the gracious declaration, addressed, indeed, to David as the type, but in words which are suitable only to the great antitype; "My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven ‡." Here, then, we perceive our own security under our exalted Leader. The Lord Jesus reigneth: and so firm is the foundation on which his government rests, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it §." If by faith we become obedient

* Psal. lxxii. 9. xviii. 40. ii. 9. 12. † Psal. cxxxii. 11. lxxxix. 4. ‡ 28, 29. § Matt. xvi. 18.

to Him, we are entitled to the benefits of the covenant; we are his seed, to whom the promises belong; and he says to us, "Because I live, ye shall live also *."

In every view, with which this comparison has presented us, we discover the infinite superiority of the Saviour. Nor is it possible, that any resemblance should give us an adequate conception of his dignity and glory. In his human nature, He may be represented by a man like ourselves; but he possesses divine perfections, and is above all description, as being "the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person †." The dominion also, which He exercises, surpasses in its excellency, its advantages, its extent and duration, all the kingdoms which have been, or can be, established on the earth. All others must fall before it, and finally be swallowed up in it ‡; and Jesus "shall reign for ever and ever §."

Enough has been said, to shew us our unspeakable obligations to the Son of God. Shall we not, then, reverence, worship, love, trust, and obey Him? Shall we not indulge a holy joy and triumph, while we confide in Him? Shall we not remain true to his interests, and exert every faculty to promote his cause in the world? Shall we not shout "Hosanna to his name," and pray that "the whole earth may be filled with his glory?" May He take to himself his great power, and so extend his reign, that "the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ!" Amen.

* John, xiv. 19. † Heb. i. 3. ‡ Dan. ii. 44. § Rev. xi. 15.

SOLOMON.

SOLOMON.

CHAP. V.

SECT. I.

Solomon—his birth and names—appointed to the throne—punished offenders—his attention to religion, and the Lord's favour to him—prayed for, and obtained wisdom—his discernment in judging—his peace, prosperity, magnificence, and understanding—an inspired writer—built the temple at Jerusalem—dedicated it to God, and received fresh assurances of the divine regard.

THE scripture history debases the pride of all human glory, and exhibits, in each character we contemplate, sufficient cause for the deepest humiliation. The person, whose life comes next in order, represents our nature, at one time, in a state of highest advancement, and at another, reduced to extreme infamy. Here we behold a man, who was raised above the level of his species, not only by his rank, but by the excellency of his understanding, who yet degenerated to a degree of folly and wickedness, which, in such an instance, we should have supposed impossible. Where, except in our first parent, have we met with a similar example; the most eminent wisdom disgraced by the basest apostasy? Perhaps, we may be at a loss to pronounce concerning the final condition of Solomon, nor is it

P 2 necessary.

neceſſary. The inſtructions, to be derived from this awful caſe, are neither doubtful, nor uninteresting to any one. Let us ſet ourſelves to the conſideration of it with true ſeriouſneſs of mind, and with earneſt prayer, that, whatever might be the ſtate of Solomon, We may not be " of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the ſaving of the ſoul."

Our expectations concerning this illuſtrious perſonage are raiſed, antecedently to his birth, while we obſerve, that he was the ſubject of a remarkable prediction, delivered to his father David. " Behold," ſaid God, " a ſon ſhall be born to thee, who ſhall be a man of reſt, and I will give him reſt from all his enemies round about: for his name ſhall be SOLOMON *, and I will give peace and quietneſs unto Iſrael in his days. He ſhall build an houſe for my name, and he ſhall be my Son, and I will be his Father, and I will eſtabliſh the throne of his kingdom over Iſrael for ever †." Doubtleſs, there was a reference herein to the Meſſiah, the greater Son of David, whom Solomon prefigured. But we are alſo led to look for a peculiar eminence of character in David's immediate ſucceſſor.

Years before Chriſt, 1033.

As ſoon as he was brought into the world, a prophet was commiſſioned to declare the divine favour toward him, and to give him a name expreſſive of this regard. " The Lord loved him, and ſent by the hand of Nathan the prophet, and called his name Jedidiah ‡, becauſe of the Lord §." Are we not ready to aſk, " What manner of child ſhall this be?"

* That is PEACEABLE. † 1 Chron. xxii. 9, 10.

‡ That is, BELOVED OF THE LORD. § 2 Sam. xii. 24, 25.

He

Years before Christ, 1015. He was appointed to the throne by the direction of God; and, on that ground, David caused him to be publicly consecrated and admitted to the regal office, before his own death. An opposition was made to his accession by the elder brother Adonijah, but soon defeated; and the kingdom was fully established in the hands of Solomon*. He came to the crown with every conceivable advantage, and the most hopeful appearances. The beginning of his reign, indeed, seems to be stained with blood; and we might apprehend the most sanguinary and tyrannical proceedings in the sequel, from some of his first acts, which yet might be a proper and necessary exercise of justice.

Adonijah, who had endeavoured to seize the reins of government, and had been pardoned only conditionally, probably still entertained treasonable designs. It was therefore a matter of political expediency at least, to frustrate the plot by instantly removing the rebel.

Abiathar, the high priest, had deserved to die, for taking part with the conspirators: but, from a regard to the services which he performed for David in his affliction, the punishment was mitigated: he was thrust out of his office, and banished to a retired situation.

Joab, that turbulent and factious General, had long merited the severest vengeance of the law, and still remained disaffected to the reigning prince. Solomon, therefore, commanded him to be dragged even from the sanctuary, and slain: and herein he acted agreeably

* 1 Kings i. 5. &c. ii. 12, &c.

to the word of God*, as well as consulted the peace and security of the state.

Shimei too was a dangerous character. He experienced the royal clemency for a time; but at length he violated his oath, and proved by his perfidy, that he could no longer be confided in; and therefore he also fell by the hand of justice.

In these instances we perceive no good reason for censuring the conduct of Solomon. He was intrusted with the supreme authority "for the punishment of evil doers;" and it is required of civil magistrates, that they "bear not the sword in vain."—Thus the Lord God fulfilled his own promise, confounded and destroyed every enemy to the succession which He had appointed, and confirmed Solomon in the complete and undisputed possession of the regal power. The hearts of the people were firmly attached to their new prince. They obeyed, they loved, they revered him. This also was of the Lord, who "magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty, as had not been on any king before him in Israel †."

We are taught to see and acknowledge the hand of the Lord in every event. The universal kingdom is His; and "He doeth according to his will." Men may oppose, but they cannot frustrate his counsels. "The powers that be are ordained of God." If their subjects be preserved in peace and due allegiance, even this is from Him, "who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men." The favour

* Ex. xxi. 13. † 1 Chron. xxix. 25.

and

and influence, we obtain with others, is such as He gives us. All personal accomplishments, mental endowments, and abilities for public usefulness, are His grant, conferred and resumed at His pleasure. How forcibly do these considerations incite us to admire, love, trust, and serve the Lord God Almighty! Let us live in dependence upon Him for all we want, exert every faculty for the honour of his name, and ascribe to his sovereign mercy every blessing we enjoy. "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things: to whom be glory for ever! Amen*."

Solomon was distinguished by the splendour of his majesty; but it is a higher recommendation of him, that "he loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father †." He appeared mindful of the many pious exhortations he had received from his aged parent, and began his reign with such a serious attention to religion, and to the sacred ordinances, as seems to warrant the conclusion, that he was truly devoted to the service of his God. It is remarked, indeed, as an objection to his character, that he complied with the custom, to which the people were extremely addicted, of sacrificing and performing other rites "in high places," after the manner of the heathen nations. Whatever might be his motive, the action itself was wrong, and of a dangerous tendency. It becomes us to take care, that our very good be not evil spoken of; and therefore we must "abstain from all appearance of evil."

* Rom. xi. 36. † 1 Kings iii. 3, &c.

Soon after his acceſſion to the throne, he held a feſtival of peculiar ſolemnity, at the head of all his nobles and the elders of Iſrael, before the ancient tabernacle of Moſes, which was fixed at Gibeon*. There he worſhipped the Lord according to the regular and inſtituted mode, ſupplicating the divine bleſſing upon himſelf and his people; and there he received a ſingular manifeſtation of the favour of Heaven. God appeared to him in "the viſions of the night," and propoſed to give him whatever he ſhould aſk. Solomon abuſed not the gracious and extenſive offer; for his mind had been previouſly prepared to aſk aright. What, then, was the choice of the young prince? Not an increaſe of wealth, or power, or honour, but wiſdom and underſtanding, that he might diſcharge his important truſt, to the glory of God, and the benefit of his ſubjects. In humble adoration of that goodneſs which had raiſed him to the moſt elevated rank, under a deep ſenſe of the weakneſs and inexperience of his youth, and from an apprehenſion of peculiar difficulties in his arduous ſituation, he earneſtly beſought the Lord to inſpire him with ſuch knowledge, that he might "miniſter judgment to the people in uprightneſs." The petition pleaſed the Lord, who therefore declared, that his utmoſt deſires ſhould be ſatisfied, and that, even what he had not ſolicited, additional riches and dignity, far beyond the poſſeſſions of other kings, ſhould be granted him. Length of days, alſo, was promiſed to him, on the condition of his perſevering obedience. From this ſolemnity he returned to Jeruſalem, and

* 2 Chron, i. 1, &c.

there

there again, with fervent gratitude, he offered many ſacrifices, and ſealed his vows before the ark of the covenant. Such a public teſtimony in favour of religion could not but produce the moſt beneficial conſequences throughout the nation.

We are not called to the like advancement, nor ought we to expect the ſame revelation as Solomon. But there is not one, even in the loweſt circumſtances, who is not bound to worſhip the Lord, and to pay a ſerious regard to all the ordinances which He has appointed. And as none are exempted from the obligation, ſo there is the ſtrongeſt encouragement for all, to "ſeek the Lord and his ſtrength." Through Jeſus Chriſt, as our prevailing advocate, the throne of grace is acceſſible, not to kings only, but to perſons of the meaneſt rank: and the propoſal made to Solomon is, in effect, applied to every one of us, "Aſk what I ſhall give thee." For thus, ſays our Redeemer, "If ye ſhall aſk any thing in my name, I will do it*." But do we obſerve a general attention to the ſervice of God? Do young men, eſpecially, and thoſe who poſſeſs riches and power, diſcover the ſame earneſt deſire as Solomon, to obtain the divine bleſſings? Who is there, of this deſcription, that has dedicated himſelf to the God of heaven? How many are devoting their beſt years to vanity and ſin? Regardleſs of all the ſpiritual benefits, which the Goſpel offers, and with an utter contempt of "the wiſdom that is from above," they covet only an increaſe of thoſe gifts which will gratify their ambition or ſenſual affections. But you, who are taught to pray

* John xiv. 14.

for

for grace, that you may glorify God in your proper station, adore that mercy, which has made you to differ from others; and be assured that He, who has thus disposed your hearts, will approve and fulfil your petitions. Entreat him, then, that he would impart to you the knowledge and love of himself, an interest in his covenant, a conformity to his image, an ability to serve him, and a lively hope of his kingdom; and you need not fear a repulse. Continue, at least, to urge your requests, and you shall not finally be denied. Nay, come with large expectations, and, through the merit of your great High priest, you shall obtain, "above all that you ask or think." You have seen the efficacy of prayer with respect to Solomon; for the Lord granted, and even far exceeded his desires. You also may look for similar success: Only "be not faithless, but believing."

That eminent degree of wisdom, which was bestowed upon Solomon, soon excited general admiration, and promoted the public good. A very difficult case occurred, which was referred to the decision of the king, and proved his acute discernment in the administration of justice. Two women, who dwelt together, had each been delivered of a son; and, upon the death of one of the infants, both demanded the living child as their own. Their pleas seemed equally valid, their claims equally strong; and no evidence could be adduced to determine the contest. "Divide the living child in two," said Solomon, "and give half to the one, and half to the other." The sentence immediately discovered the real mother, who, when she saw the

the ſword prepared for the execution, yearned over her infant with the tendereſt affection, and prayed that it might be ſpared; willing rather to reſign it to the falſe claimant, than to be witneſs of its deſtruction.

The depravity of human nature has rendered the province of judges and magiſtrates extremely difficult indeed. Such perſons, therefore, have eſpecial need to beg of God, that He would direct their enquiries, and give them a quickneſs of perception "to ſearch out a matter*." Thus will they be a peculiar bleſſing to the ſtate, when they are careful to "judge righteouſly between every man and his brother, and the ſtranger that is with him †." And "the king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne ſhall be eſtabliſhed for ever ‡."

Thoſe alſo, who preſide in ſpiritual concerns, ſhould learn from Solomon, to ſeek the proper qualifications for their office by fervent prayer. Are they called to "go out and come in" before a numerous people, and to diſtinguiſh between the different claims of religious profeſſors? How arduous and important the work! Even ſuch miniſters of Chriſt, as poſſeſs the moſt eminent abilities, may well cry out, "Who is ſufficient for theſe things? O give thy ſervants an underſtanding heart!" They ſhould not deſpiſe human literature, but diligently improve it for the ſervice of the ſanctuary. Yet, with the beſt advantages of education, they may be "blind guides," and miſlead thoſe immortal ſouls, who truſt to their judgment. O that God would therefore pour out "the ſpirit of under-

* Prov. xxv. 2. † Deut. i. 16. ‡ Prov. xxix. 14.

ſtanding"

ſtanding" upon all the paſtors and governors of his church, that they may "diſcern between good and bad!"

The reign of Solomon is celebrated for its peace and proſperity, as well as for the wiſdom and equity of his adminiſtration *. His ſubjects were firmly united together, and undiſturbed by any foreign aſſaults; ſo that they multiplied exceedingly, and enjoyed the fruits of their labour in quiet and ſecurity. His dominion, alſo, was enlarged to an extent unknown before: in conſequence of which, his wealth and magnificence received an amazing increaſe. But the part of his character, for which he has been moſt admired is the peculiar eminence of his underſtanding. He was endued with an unequalled diſcernment in other ſciences, as well as in divine things and the art of government. Nor was his learning uſeleſs: much did he ſpeak, and much did he write for the inſtruction of mankind, particularly on the ſubject of morals and natural philoſophy. Many of his compoſitions are now loſt; but we are favoured with three ſpecimens, which have a diſtinguiſhed place in the ſacred canon, and are a valuable treaſure to the Church of God. We do not wonder, that ſuch uncommon abilities procured him ſo high eſtimation in the world.

But we turn our eyes from Solomon, to obſerve the hand of God in the gifts beſtowed upon him. Let us not forget, that riches, power, peace, and proſperity are diſpenſed among the ſons of men, even as He, the Almighty Sovereign, pleaſeth. He alone appoints the

* 1 Kings iv. 20, &c.

difference

difference we perceive in all attainments: for "a man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven*." It is manifest, that Solomon's pre-eminence was granted him in answer to prayer, and in performance of the divine promises. WE do not expect, or need the like superiority; but an "understanding in the way of godliness" is absolutely necessary for all: and this also "cometh from above." We are encouraged to apply for it with fervent petitions; for a gracious voice declares, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him†."

Years before Christ, 1012. The building of the temple was one grand object, to which Solomon directed his attention. For this particular purpose he was raised up of God, and blessed with peace and prosperity. He had been appointed to the work by express prophecy before his birth, and charged to undertake it by the solemn injunctions of his dying father. Nor was he unmindful of his commission; but with great ardour he proceeded to the execution of the plan, as soon as the preparations requisite could be made. We stand in admiration of his zeal for the honour of God, while we observe, that for seven years together he was vigorously employed in erecting that splendid edifice, for the administration of the divine service, and that he was not unwilling to devote his wealth to the sanctuary. It pleased God to give him the friendship of a neighbouring prince, the king of Tyre, who was, in a remarkable manner, disposed to lend his utmost assistance

* John iii. 27. † James i. 5.

for

for the accomplishment of Solomon's design *.—How wonderful are the ways of Providence! The Lord appoints to each of us our proper work, and He will not fail so to order our circumstances, that we shall be furnished with every thing needful for the right performance of it. Only let us be faithful and diligent, and exert all our abilities in obedience to Him. Whatever riches we possess, whatever alliances we form, let us keep in view the end of our calling, and use every advantage, which our situation may put into our hands, in a subserviency to His glory.

We cannot here enter into a minute description of the very magnificent house, which Solomon erected for the name of the God of Israel, or point out the design of its various parts and utensils. Suffice it to say, that the whole was executed agreeably to the directions, which David had received from heaven and delivered to his son †. When the temple was completed, the king himself, with the greatest solemnity and most ardent piety, dedicated it to God, and implored His blessing upon it ‡. Then indeed he shone in his brightest lustre; nor can we conceive any thing upon earth more grand and majestic, than his behaviour upon that sacred occasion. We are compelled to revere the character of the monarch, who with an uncommon zeal stood before his nobles and all his princes, as a preacher of righteousness, and as a priest of the most high God.

* 1 Kings v. 1, &c. † 1 Kings vi. and vii.
‡ 1 Kings viii. 2 Chron. v. vi. and vii.

Having

Years before Christ, 1004. Having assembled together the elders of his people, he conducted the ark of the Covenant into the most holy place appointed for it, with loud thanksgivings to God; and immediately "the glory of the Lord filled the house," as a token of His gracious presence. Then the king, in the audience of all the congregation, declared the purposes for which the temple was erected, and praised God for the completion of His promises concerning it. Upon an eminence, which was raised in the midst of the court before the altar, he kneeled down, and, spreading forth his hands toward heaven, he poured out the devout emotions of his soul. He acknowledged the faithfulness and goodness of God in putting such an honour upon him, and prayed that the further engagements of mercy, on behalf of his posterity, might be fulfilled. Considering the immensity and majesty of Jehovah, he seemed to shrink back from the idea of expecting His residence within those consecrated walls; but, encouraged by His gracious assurances, he implored His favour toward all, who should worship in that house.——His petitions being ended, he arose from his knees, and pronounced his benediction upon the people. He entreated, he charged them, to dedicate themselves to God without reserve, and to persevere in their obedience with an unshaken integrity. He then called upon them to join with him in offering sacrifices, and in other solemn rites, which were continued for fourteen days together. This was indeed a sacred festival to the Lord; in which, probably, more fervent piety appeared, than on any occasion we

 have

have ever heard of. The very numerous congregation were deeply impreſſed by the prayers and exhortations of their ſovereign. They ſaw the divine glory deſcending upon the temple; and the fire from heaven conſuming their oblations, and were conſtrained to bow before the Lord in adoration of His mercy. At length they were diſmiſſed with ſentiments of love and admiration toward their prince, and of holy joy and gratitude toward God, who had beſtowed ſuch favours upon them.

But what do WE learn from the example before us? Let us not ſuppoſe, that "the great men of the earth," are the only perſons, who are bound to exert themſelves for the honour of God. It is a common cauſe, which requires the united influence of all ranks and conditions. What, then, are we doing to promote this end? Are we joining in the worſhip of God with real ardour of devotion? And are we exciting others to it? Ah! what mean that languor and indifference, which we obſerve to be generally prevalent, in all religious concerns? The temple of Jeruſalem, ſo ſet apart as we have ſeen, was the place where all the Jews were commanded to offer up their ſacrifices. But now the Lord will manifeſt his gracious preſence in every place, where his faithful people meet, will hear and anſwer their petitions. O be thankful, you, who enjoy thoſe ordinances, to which the divine bleſſing is promiſed! Conſider their value; be conſtant, be ſerious, be fervent in your attendance upon them. "Wait on the Lord," in His inſtituted means, and you "ſhall renew your ſtrength."—"Enter into His courts," and "worſhip

"worſhip at His footſtool," with faith and love, and you alſo ſhall behold his glory.

The inſtance before us proves, that it is not vain to ſeek God. Solomon received a freſh aſſurance in a viſion, that his prayer was accepted, and that a favourable regard would be paid to the ſervices of the temple*. The Lord alſo renewed the Covenant with him, declaring, that a perſeverance in righteouſneſs would ſecure peculiar advantages to him and his poſterity, but that a departure from the true religion would inevitably be followed with an utter deſolation of his kingdom, and of the ſtately edifice he had erected.—It is the moſt horrid preſumption to imagine, that we can enjoy the protection, or eſcape the curſe of God, any otherwiſe than in a ſteadfaſt adherence to His precepts. May the warning produce a holy fear and circumſpection in every one of us! "The Lord is with you, while ye be with Him; and if ye ſeek Him, He will be found of you: but if ye forſake Him, He will forſake you†."

* 1 Kings ix. 1, &c. † 2 Chron. xv. 2.

SOLOMON.

SECT. 2.

Solomon erected palaces, and fortified cities—extended his commerce by navigation—frequented the divine service—visited by the queen of Sheba—admired by surrounding nations—declined, through his love of women—supported their idolatries—displeased God—opposed by Jeroboam—probably a penitent—wrote Ecclesiastes, as a warning to others—typified the Redeemer in several respects.

VARIOUS and important are the advantages which attend the practice of piety. It promotes the present as well as eternal happiness of individuals, and brings down the blessing of God upon families and kingdoms. Solomon could testify from his own experience, and the universal history of mankind confirms the observation, that "righteousness exalteth a nation*."

The reign of this prince was distinguished by its uninterrupted prosperity, so long as he faithfully adhered to the covenant of his God. For many years together, while his wealth and magnificence increased, he was employed in erecting stately palaces and other edifices, for the honour of his majesty, as well as for the purposes of government†. Several strong and for-

* Prov. xiv. 34.

† 1 Kings vii. 1—12. ix. 13, &c. 2 Chron. viii. 1, &c.

tified

tified cities were built in different parts of his dominion, with a view either to utility or grandeur; and the heathen nations around him became tributary to him. By means of his alliance with the king of Tyre, he acquired the knowledge of navigation, extended his commerce, and imported into his kingdom the riches and commodities of distant lands. Yet, amidst all his splendour, and the necessary attention to state affairs, he was not unmindful of the divine service. For a long time he continued to frequent the public ordinances, and was found among the most constant worshippers of God.

Years before Christ, about 992. A character so remarkable, placed in such eminence of rank, and possessed of such an uncommon degree of moral excellence and religious zeal, could not fail of attracting the notice and admiration of the neighbouring princes. Many came from afar, with valuable presents, that they might be instructed by that wisdom, "which God had put into his heart." Among other instances of this kind, the visit of the queen of Sheba has been most minutely recorded*. Much she had heard of the reputation, and very highly she had conceived of the extraordinary abilities, of the king of Israel. With an earnest desire, therefore, to consult him upon certain difficulties concerning "the deep things of God," she undertook a long, tedious, and expensive journey. She obtained the wished-for interview, and received from him the most satisfactory information. When she beheld the order and

* 1 King x. 1, &c. 2 Chron. ix. 1, &c.

the beauty of his inſtitutions, both civil and eccleſiaſtical, ſhe was conſtrained to admire his ſingular attainments, pronounced his attendants happy, and praiſed God for placing ſo eminent a prince on the throne of Iſrael.

Such regard and aſtoniſhment did the wiſdom of Solomon excite: but alas! with what neglect and contempt was that exalted Perſonage treated, who is ſtiled, "The wiſdom of God!" Some, indeed, were compelled to acknowledge, "Never man ſpake like this man." But, among thoſe of rank or reputation in the world, He was accounted no better than a fool or a madman. Thus he himſelf complains of the general diſdain he met with; "The queen of the ſouth ſhall riſe up in judgment with this generation, and ſhall condemn it: for ſhe came from the uttermoſt parts of the earth to hear the wiſdom of Solomon; and behold! a greater than Solomon is here*." He is ſtill preſent with his miniſters, and in his ordinances, and promiſes to inſtruct all thoſe, who lament their ignorance, and deſire to be taught of Him. But his offers are ſtill rejected with the utmoſt ſcorn. How few liſten to the words of his mouth! Is not this the language of thouſands, "Depart from us; for we deſire not the knowledge of thy ways†?" What pains and expence will men beſtow upon the improvement of their underſtanding, for the common concerns of this life, in order to gain that knowledge, which, whatever excellence it may boaſt of, muſt ſoon vaniſh away! But the ſmalleſt pains and expence would be thought too much for the

* Matt. xii. 42. † Job xxi. 14.

attainment

attainment of that wisdom, which has in view the noblest objects, produces the happiest consequences, and alone can direct us to the sure possession of eternal glory. This, then, is the condemnation of many among ourselves, that "light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil*." "O that they were wise," that they would "covet earnestly the best gifts," and cry unto God for the illumination of his Spirit!

Years before Christ, about 984. The king of Israel continued to increase in power, wealth, and magnificence, the envy and admiration of all the surrounding kingdoms. But at length an awful change in his moral and religious character appeared. As we advance towards the close of his reign, we behold a sad reverse of his former exemplary conduct. We cannot but be affected with distress and horror at the sight, and ask, where is that knowledge and zeal, which raised universal astonishment? "How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed!" Here, then, we are called to weep over the ruins of that stately edifice, which we have been contemplating in all its glory. Had the temple, which he built, been utterly demolished, till one stone had not been left upon another, the calamitous event would have been nothing in comparison. A far more afflicting scene is now to pass before us: the excellency of Solomon debased by the vile apostasy of his declining years!

From his beginning, we expected the most happy conclusion. Some transactions, indeed, may deserve

* John iii. 19.

censure, in the early part of his reign. He had made affinity with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and taken his daughter to wife; which was, doubtless, a connection of a dangerous tendency, as it might gradually weaken the strength of his religious principles*. Nor do we represent him as a spotless character, in any period of his life. But, on the whole, we have seen him so ardent in the service of God, so uniformly attentive to the duties of his high station, that we were ready to pronounce him the most eminent of his species. Alas! how often are the husbandman's hopes disappointed! How often are the gay and promising appearances of the spring suddenly blasted! And how awfully are our expectations frustrated in the close of this history! "King Solomon loved many strange women (together with the daughter of Pharaoh), women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father†."

Here we perceive the nature, the origin, and the rapid progress of his sin. "He loved MANY women." Who does not foresee, whither this must lead him? He, who is not satisfied within the limits, which God has appointed, will scarcely be contained within any limits whatever. The violence of lust can be over-

* 1 Kings iii. 1. † 1 Kings xi. 1, &c.

come

come only by a steady resistance; not by a foolish indulgence, which always increases it. Ah! Solomon, what availed thy wisdom in the art of government, since it did not effectually teach thee to govern thyself? "Thou didst bow thy loins unto women, and by thy body thou wast brought into subjection. Thou didst stain thy honour, and pollute thy seed: so that thou broughtest wrath upon thy children, and wast grieved for thy folly*."

But of what sort were his numerous connections? "He loved many STRANGE women." He joined himself to those, who were "aliens from the common wealth of Israel," and enemies to the true God. This was expressly forbidden by the divine law†. And do there not appear the strongest reasons for such a prohibition? In general, we do not observe, that ignorant and ungodly persons are brought over to the ways of God by the influence of good men, who have needlessly formed any close intimacy with them. But universal experience testifies, that "evil communications corrupt good manners." The severest piety will scarcely be proof against the continual solicitations, to which it must be exposed by such alliances as these. How difficult is it not to comply with those we love! And in how many instances, which we have known, has this solemn admonition been verified, "They will turn away your hearts!"

Solomon, probably, little thought of advancing so far, as to practise or countenance the stupid idolatry

* Ecclus. xlvii. 19, 20. † Exod. xxxiv. 16—Deut. vii. 3.

of his wives, and might conclude, that his ſuperior underſtanding would be a ſufficient ſecurity to him. But one ſin paves the way for another; and eſpecially, when the reins are given to our luſts, who can tell where we ſhall ſtop, or what will be the conſequence? We behold even Solomon admitting and ſupporting the worſhip of falſe gods in his kingdom. He, who had built a moſt magnificent houſe for the God of Iſrael, erected temples for the gods of the Heathen, and, it ſhould ſeem, attended at their ſacrifices, and bowed before their altars.

What ſhall we ſay to theſe things? We ſtand amazed and confounded, and know not what to anſwer. Ah! what fears does this caſe excite in the heart of the humble Chriſtian! Will not ſuch an one cry out, "Lord, how is it, that I am kept, if he, who was raiſed ſo high in a religious profeſſion, could not maintain his ground? Or how ſhall I hope to perſevere in righteouſneſs, when I ſee Solomon, with all his admired abilities, falling into the groſſeſt abominations?"——Here, doubtleſs, we learn, what human nature is, and what continual occaſion we have for circumſpection and ſelf-abhorrence. So great is our tendency to evil, that it frequently overcomes the moſt powerful reſtraints; nor can we conceive the confuſion, which would enſue, if every barrier were removed. For proofs of this extreme depravity, we need not look to the wilds of Africa or America; we perceive it in the moſt enlightened nations, we feel the ſad ſymptoms of it within us. The beſt of men are ſenſible of much inward corruption, and dread the thought

thought of being given up to themſelves. They are held in with a ſtrong hand; or elſe, there is no folly or madneſs ſo exceſſive, no iniquity ſo heinous, into which they might not be betrayed. It has pleaſed God to ſuffer ſome of the moſt eminent characters to be carried away by their own vicious affections, and thereby to ſhew us, how far WE may depart from Him, if He ſhould forſake us. "Let no man, therefore, glory in men." Let none preſume upon any ſuppoſed excellence they have attained; but let all fear and tremble for themſelves.

There were ſome peculiar aggravations in Solomon's declenſion; and theſe very conſiderations will teach us to watch and to pray.

He was not young, when his paſſions broke out with ſuch violence, and effected the awful change. This came to paſs "when he was old," when we ſhould have imagined that the fire of luſt had been extinguiſhed. But alas! no age is ſecure. Not merely young perſons, but even thoſe of advanced years, have need to "keep their hearts with all diligence," and to ſeek protection in the grace of God alone.

We might have thought, that his good ſenſe and enlarged intellect would have been a ſufficient preſervative from the fooleries, into which he was led. Many of the meaneſt capacity, we apprehend, would have abhorred, what the wiſeſt of men committed. It will become us, therefore, not to over-rate or envy the moſt ſplendid abilities, or the moſt improved underſtanding. "Let not the wiſe man glory in his wiſdom,"

dom," or forget his dependence upon the God of heaven.

The religious profeſſions of Solomon, and the warnings he had received, greatly enhance his guilt. When we view him bowing among the worſhippers of idols, we are ready to aſk, Is this he, whom David had inſtructed and exhorted to ſerve the true God? Is this the pious youth, who ſought the Lord in Gibeon? Is this the zealous king, who had prayed ſo fervently at the dedication of the temple, and delivered the moſt excellent precepts to the people? Is this the man, with whom Jehovah had vouchſafed to hold the moſt intimate communications, and whom He had expreſsly charged to beware of this very ſin? Alas! how deſperately wicked is the human heart, which can break through the ſtrongeſt barriers to gratify its beloved luſts! Remember your weakneſs, though you are ever ſo ſtrenuous in the cauſe of truth and righteouſneſs. Depend not on your good education, your ſuppoſed firmneſs in right principles, your envied privileges, comforts, or attainments in religion. All theſe may fail you in an hour of temptation. Nay, probably, your ſuperiority over others may prove a ſnare to you; as hereby you may be rendered leſs circumſpect, and Satan may be the more deſirous to caſt you down.

Years before Christ, 975. Are we not anxious to know the iſſue? Alas! the ſun, which had riſen with uncommon ſplendour, at laſt ſet behind a cloud. Was not Solomon, then, recovered? We are almoſt at a loſs to anſwer. His recovery is not expreſsly declared; and perhaps the leſs notice is taken of the ſtate in which he

he died, that we may be the more afraid of apoſtaſy. His backſliding, which was very offenſive to God, brought extreme diſtreſs upon himſelf. "The Lord was angry with him;" and, by an immediate revelation, He teſtified his diſpleaſure, and his determination to rend a large ſhare of the kingdom from the hands of his ſucceſſor. Various temporal calamities, alſo, imbittered the decline of his life. Oppoſition was ſtirred up againſt him in different parts of his dominion, through the righteous judgment of God; and he received the painful information, that his own ſervant Jeroboam, by the divine appointment, would ſhortly rule over ten of the tribes of Iſrael. His envy and reſentment were therefore kindled againſt Jeroboam; and he ſought to kill him: ſo that, for ſome time at leaſt, he did not ſhew any proper contrition for his offence, ſince he quarrelled with his puniſhment.

Yet it is generally ſuppoſed, that he died a true penitent. It is preſumed, that One, who was named "Beloved of the Lord," would not be finally abandoned to the machinations of Satan. It is thought, that his very caſe was foretold, when the Lord ſaid to David, "I will be his Father, and he ſhall be my ſon: if he commit iniquity, I will chaſten him with the rod of men, and with the ſtripes of the children of men: but my mercy ſhall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee*."

The ſtrongeſt proof of his repentance is the book of Eccleſiaſtes, which was evidently written in his old age, after a long experience of ſin and folly. Here he

* 2 Sam. vii. 14, 15.

confeſſes

confeſſes and deplores his madneſs; and, in the character of "The Preacher," warns others by his own example againſt the inordinate love of preſent things, and particularly againſt fleſhly luſts, which had brought him to the very gates of hell. Let us ſeriouſly attend, then, to this awful caſe, as deſcribed by himſelf. "Whatſoever mine eyes deſired, I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy: for my heart rejoiced in all my labour, and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour, that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of ſpirit, and there was no profit under the ſun*." Indulge no longer the vain expectation of obtaining happineſs from any ſenſual gratifications. If the world, with all its advantages, were able to ſatisfy the ſoul, and afford real joy, Solomon would have found it ſo. For he gave full ſcope to his deſires, and tried every poſſible ſcheme of pleaſure; yet he was diſappointed in all; and, for our admonition, he has left this inſcription on all earthly enjoyments, "VANITY AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT."

Baſe as the departure of Solomon was, the grace of God could recover and pardon him. To that grace, which is treaſured up in the Saviour, we refer all thoſe, who are ready to deſpond under a ſenſe of their aggravated guilt. Far as you have wandered from God, and faithleſs as you have been to your ſolemn vows and engagements, "Return, ye backſliding children, and the Lord will heal your backſliding." But let none

* Eccleſ. ii. 10, 11.

derive

derive encouragement from the mercy or the faithfulneſs of God, to continue in ſin. Say not, while you are indulging every vile affection, "We ſhall infallibly be ſaved, becauſe we have once known the Lord; and He will not ſuffer one of his ſheep to periſh." Your confidence is grounded on a ſad perverſion of an acknowledged truth, and is therefore a dangerous preſumption. You may be deceived in your opinion of yourſelves; and you may have deceived others by your religious profeſſions. Suſpect your boaſted experience. Many who were utterly unſound, have ſeemed, for a ſeaſon, to make conſiderable progreſs in piety. Search and try your hearts: and, whatever has been your former ſtate, "Do the firſt works: Repent, and turn yourſelves from all your tranſgreſſions; ſo iniquity ſhall not be your ruin."

We cannot conclude our account of Solomon, without adverting to the more glorious Perſonage, whom he typified in a very eminent manner. The New Teſtament declares, that One greater than Solomon is come to reign over us, and to poſſeſs the throne of his father David. May we not ſee ſomething of His excellency, faintly repreſented to us in this figure?

The Saviour was, in a more exalted ſenſe, the child of promiſe; and, by expreſs direction from heaven, He received an appellation, which implies he was "choſen of God and precious." He alſo was conſecrated to the regal office; and, like the king of Iſrael, though He be ready to ſpare, He will finally execute and deſtroy every obſtinate rebel againſt his government. He cannot be impoſed on, by any ſpecious

tales,

tales, but moſt accurately diſcerns between different characters, even as Solomon diſtinguiſhed the real from the pretended mother. "An hypocrite ſhall not come before Him." Let us not dare, then, to put on a counterfeit appearance of piety. The remarkable tranquillity, as well as equity of Solomon's reign, prefigured that of the Redeemer. He is, in the higheſt ſenſe, "The Prince of Peace:" and happy indeed are his faithful ſubjects, who, under his protection, "dwell ſafely, and are quiet from fear of evil." He ſays to us, "Come unto me,—and ye ſhall find reſt unto your ſouls."

David's immediate ſucceſſor was appointed, in an eſpecial manner, to build the temple of the Lord. Therein alſo we perceive a repreſentation of that infinitely more important work, which is committed to the Son of God. Concerning Him, too, we underſtand the prophecy, "He ſhall build an houſe for my name *." This ſpiritual edifice riſes from age to age, under his care; and whatever oppoſition be made, it ſhall receive continual increaſe. "He ſhall bring forth the headſtone thereof with ſhoutings, crying, grace, grace unto it! He has laid the foundation, and His hands ſhall finiſh it †." How great the honour of having a place in it! Happy thoſe, who, "as lively ſtones, are built up a ſpiritual houſe, for an habitation of God through the Spirit ‡." He calls upon us to aſſiſt in the arduous undertaking. Let us exert our abilities, conſecrate all that we have to this ſervice, and account ourſelves highly favoured, in contributing to

* 2 Sam. vii. 13. † Zech. iv. 7, 9. ‡ 1 Pet. ii. 5. Eph. ii. 22.

promote

promote the glorious plan. Who is there among us, then, who "will build in the houſe of the Lord?"

The moſt prominent feature in Solomon's character, we have ſeen, was his wiſdom; and here again we diſcover the ſimilitude of Him, "in whom are hid all the treaſures of wiſdom and knowledge*." This wiſdom He poſſeſſes without any limits, and diſplays throughout the adminiſtration of his government: a meaſure of it, alſo, He imparts to all his people. Let us attend to his ſolemn addreſs: "Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the ſons of man. O ye ſimple, underſtand wiſdom; and ye fools, be ye of an underſtanding heart.—Bleſſed is the man, that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the poſts of my doors. For whoſo findeth me, findeth life, and ſhall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that ſinneth againſt me, wrongeth his own ſoul: all they that hate me love death †."

Multitudes, even of the moſt diſtinguiſhed rank, reſorted to Solomon. But alas, this is not, as yet, fully exemplified in Jeſus. He has hitherto been "deſpiſed and rejected of men." His glory, however, ſhall ſoon appear; and then, "even the rich among the people ſhall entreat his favour ‡." "All from Sheba ſhall come: they ſhall bring gold and incenſe; and they ſhall ſhew forth the praiſes of the Lord ‖." May the Lord haſten it in his time! May the glory of the Saviour be revealed, and all fleſh ſee it together! Hoſanna to the Son of David! Bleſſed be the King of Iſrael, that cometh in the name of the Lord! Amen.

* Col. ii. 3. † Prov. viii. 4, 5, 34—36.
‡ Pſal. xlv. 12. ‖ Iſa. lx. 6.

AHAB.

CHAP. VI.

Ahab, an abandoned character—an idolater—instigated by his queen, Jezebel—threatened by Elijah—persecuted him—consented to the massacre of Baal's priests—delivered from the famine—reproached for his conduct to Benhadad—coveted and seized on Naboth's vineyard—met by Elijah—condemned—reprieved, on his humiliation—hated and imprisoned Micaiah—wounded in battle—died.

THE sacred records, which were designed to preserve the history of the church, relate chiefly to those, who were "redeemed to God from the earth." But others of a different description are occasionally brought before us; and they demand our serious attention. Doubtless, we may derive much profitable instruction from the most abandoned, as well as from the most excellent characters. The former represent our nature in a state of awful degeneracy, and call us to humiliation, penitence, and prayer. The latter exhibit a more pleasing view; but they afford us no more cause of boasting than the others, for they prove only, what the grace of God has done for our fallen race.

A sinner of peculiar infamy, depraved beyond the common measure of his species, is now proposed to our consideration. "There was none like unto Ahab, who

who did ſell himſelf to work wickedneſs in the ſight of the Lord *." May the odiouſneſs of his name deter us from the moſt diſtant imitation of his example!

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided into two parts, according to the divine threatening. Ten of the tribes of Iſrael revolted from Rehoboam, the ſon of Solomon, formed themſelves into a ſeparate government under the conduct of Jeroboam, and were never more ſubject to the houſe of David. Upon this revolution, alſo, they forſook the worſhip of the true God; and, probably from political motives, eſtabliſhed idolatry as the national religion. Jeroboam, their new leader, to prevent them from going up to the temple ſervice, and to detach them more entirely from the kings of Judah, commanded them to attend at Dan and Bethel, and to bow before the golden calves, which he had there ſet up. The bad effects of the change very ſoon appeared. The people, almoſt univerſally, apoſtatized from God, and their princes were altogether vile and abominable.

Ahab was the ſeventh in ſucceſſion; and during thoſe ſeveral reigns the nation made a continual progreſs in ſin. What other conſequence can be expected, when men forſake God; and are given up to their own ways? One ruler of Iſrael after another was deſtroyed by the juſt judgment of an angry God; yet thoſe, who followed, laid it not to heart. It ſeemed that each reſolved to tread in the ſteps of him, who had gone before, or rather, if poſſible, to exceed him

* 1 Kings, xxi. 25.

in wickedneſs. Such was Omri, the father of Ahab, who "wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worſe than all that were before him *." What, then, could be looked for from the ſon of ſo abandoned a father? We have known, indeed, inſtances of real and eminent piety among the deſcendants of profane parents. But ſuch is the influence of education, ſuch the evil tendency of human nature, that children are prone to imitate bad examples, and very apt in learning the corrupt practices of their teachers, unleſs the grace of God interpoſe to prevent it. We do not wonder, therefore, when we read, that "Ahab, the ſon of Omri, did evil in the ſight of the Lord above all that were before him, and did more to provoke the Lord God of Iſrael to anger than all the kings of Iſrael that were before him †." What extenſive miſchief, then, may follow from the neglect of your offspring! If they perceive in you an avowed contempt of God and his worſhip, it is probable, that they will be at leaſt as zealous in the cauſe of wickedneſs and infidelity as yourſelves; and the ruinous effects may ſpread from age to age.

Young people, however, muſt not ſcreen themſelves behind the authority of their parents; for they ſhall anſwer for their own iniquity. Their connections may expoſe them to peculiar dangers and temptations, but do not furniſh them with an excuſe for ſin. Let Ahab warn them of the ſad conſequences of imitating the profaneneſs of their neareſt friends or progenitors.

* 1 Kings, xvi. 25. † 30, 33.

This

Years before Christ, 919. This impious prince was no ſooner in poſſeſſion of the government, than he ſhewed himſelf a decided oppoſer of true religion. He not only caſt off all regard to the ſervice of Jehovah, but went farther than any of his predeceſſors, inaſmuch as he introduced the deteſtable rites of the heathens, and erected a temple for Baal. Some part of his zeal in this buſineſs we are to aſcribe to the alliance, which he had formed. He married Jezebel, the daughter of an idolatrous king, a woman of a fierce, perſecuting, and abandoned diſpoſition: and it ſhould ſeem, that, in compliment to his queen, or influenced by her inſtigations, he committed ſome atrocious crimes, which, bad as he was, he would not otherwiſe have done. On her account, probably, he became an advocate for Baal, and hunted the Lord's prophets to deſtroy them.

Alas! how frequently does the dear partner, who ſhould be the counſellor and favourer of every thing good and virtuous, prove a tempter and a ſeducer! How many have given up their principles to pleaſe their wives! This thought, ſurely, ſhould engage the attention of our younger readers. Your future character and conduct, perhaps your eternal ſtate, may depend on your choice of the companion, to whom you are to be united for life. Beware, leſt a regard to worldly proſpects, your ill-directed fancy, or the ſolicitations of your luſt, draw you into ſuch connections, as may, in the iſſue, be fatal to your ſouls. Suppoſe not, that you can withſtand every entitement to evil, while you ſee how many have been overcome. Nor

imagine, that you ſhall convert her to the cauſe of truth, who is yet an enemy to it; but rather fear, leſt your own minds ſhould be more and more corrupted. For how can you expect the bleſſing of God, if you act in contradiction to His will and command? Is it leſs dangerous for you, than it was for the Jews of old, to be thus joined with unbelievers? Or is your religion of leſs value than their's, that you are not ſo much concerned to maintain it?

The Lord is patient and longſuffering; but in the miſery, which ſin occaſions, even here, we perceive an evident token of his diſpleaſure againſt it. The prophet Elijah, whoſe miniſtry had been deſpiſed and oppoſed, was ſent to denounce the judgment of God againſt the king for his impiety; and accordingly, a long drought and famine reduced the whole country to the utmoſt extremity *. Ahab himſelf felt the diſtreſs, but was not humbled by it. He ſtill perſiſted in his idolatry, and hated, and perſecuted with murderous rage, the faithful meſſenger of Heaven. He continued to patroniſe and ſupport above eight hundred prieſts of Baal, and ſuffered the prophets of Jehovah (except a hundred, whom good Obadiah concealed) to be put to the ſword at the inſtigation of Jezebel.

The moſt calamitous events will not bring men to a right mind: nay, ſome bold offenders become the more obdurate under the divine corrections. Such is the hardneſs and impenitence of the human heart, that neither mercies nor judgments will, of themſelves, ſoften or ſubdue it.

* 1 Kings, xvii. and xviii.

"Though

———" Though woo'd and aw'd,
Bleſs'd and chaſtis'd, a flagrant rebel ſtill *!"

How many, like Ahab, have deeply revolted from God! And has He not, in various ways, ſolicited your return? But, though He has afflicted you in your perſons, your families, or your ſubſtance, are you not ſtill in league with ſin? Is not the ſpiritual worſhip of God and the miniſtry of his ſervants, offenſive to you? Numerous inſtances, at leaſt, occur of the very ſame temper, which appeared in the king of Iſrael.

Ahab had ſought for Elijah from one nation to another, it ſhould ſeem, with a murderous intent; and yet, when the prophet voluntarily preſented himſelf before him, he had no power to hurt him. He reproached him, indeed, as the troubler of Iſrael, but ſtood to hear his faithful reproofs, and, as if he were won over to his ſide, complied with his requiſition, in ſummoning the prieſts and the worſhippers of Baal to a general aſſembly. There he himſelf attended; and, when he had beheld Elijah's decided victory over the advocates of idolatry, probably under the conviction which that victory produced, he conſented to the death of four hundred and fifty of thoſe very prieſts, whom he had introduced and ſupported.

It is no unuſual thing for men of the moſt abandoned character to be ſtruck with profound awe, and reſtrained from their vile purpoſes, by the preſence of an eminently pious perſon. There is a power in real godlineſs, which commands the reverence of thoſe who

* Dr. Young.

hate it; and this the proudeſt ſinners often ſo far feel, as to be unable to carry on their violent oppoſition againſt it, while yet no ſaving change is effected upon them.

Perhaps ſome good impreſſions and reſolutions, in favour of the true religion, were produced in Ahab's breaſt by the late occurrence; and for the time he might have intended to baniſh idolatry. It might be, alſo, with a deſign to put his ſincerity to the teſt, that the Lord ſpared him, and delivered him from the oppreſſion of the famine. Thoſe, who are fartheſt from God, probably have intervals of ſerious reflection, eſpecially under the painful viſitations of Providence, or the ſolemn admonitions of a preacher, which may conſtrain them to form ſchemes of amendment. This has been the caſe of thouſands, who have periſhed in their ſins: we ſhould, therefore, be warned from them, not to trifle with our convictions. Our afflictions may be removed, as were thoſe of Ahab, on purpoſe to try us. O let us ſeize the convenient opportunity, and prove that we are in earneſt "to flee from the wrath to come."

What, then, was the effect with Ahab? He reported thoſe remarkable tranſactions, which he had himſelf beheld upon mount Carmel, to his queen Jezebel *: and this might be done with no ill deſign. But her rage was excited, when ſhe heard that her favourite prieſts were deſtroyed; and immediately ſhe vowed to take vengeance on Elijah; nor did Ahab, as he ought, reſiſt her wicked propoſal, or defend the prophet of Jehovah.—Are there not thoſe, alſo, among

* 1 King, xix. 1, &c.

ourſelves,

ourſelves, who, with a full perſuaſion of the truth of the Goſpel, are afraid or aſhamed to ſtand up in its vindication, and who therefore tamely acquieſce in the violent ſchemes of its oppoſers? What baſe cowardice and treachery is this! In ſuch a cauſe, it is not ſufficient, nor is it poſſible, to remain neuter. For thus the Saviour has determined, "He that is not with me, is againſt me*."

Years before Christ, 901. Ahab was not properly affected by the divine mercy in the removal of the famine; nor was any reformation produced in him or his people. We might, therefore, have expected, that ſome heavier judgment would have been inflicted, and the protection of God entirely withdrawn from them. But, though impenitent, they were ſtill favoured. A very formidable attack of Benhadad, the king of Syria, threw them into the utmoſt conſternation, and threatened them with inſtant deſtruction †. Yet Iſrael obtained a very ſignal deliverance: again and again their inſulting foes were overcome, not by their good management, but by the gracious appointment of Heaven. The victory, indeed, was granted, not ſo much out of kindneſs to Ahab or his ſubjects, as to ſecure the divine glory in the puniſhment of the Syrian king, who had blaſphemed the God of Iſrael.——It is not uncommon for one wicked man to be the inſtrument of chaſtiſing another. Sinners, you may be ſpared and protected by the providence of God, in preference to ſome, not more abandoned than yourſelves. A longer time of trial may be allowed you: but depend not on your preſent

* Matt. xii. 30. † 1 Kings, xx. 1, &c.

eaſe and proſperity. For deſtruction may ſtill be near, even at the doors. Or, what will it avail you, that your life be protracted, if you lengthen out your days in iniquity?

Benhadad was delivered into Ahab's power, for the expreſs purpoſe of being made an example of juſtice. Ahab, however, neglected his commiſſion, and through a ſinful lenity not only permitted the inſolent offender to eſcape, but treated him as his brother, and entered into a fooliſh covenant with him. This conduct was highly offenſive to God, who, therefore, ſent by a prophet to reprove and to threaten him for his diſobedience, aſſuring him, that he muſt ſoon loſe his own life, in lieu of the criminal, whom he had ſpared.—— We are not at liberty, in any caſe, to conſult the maxims of pride or worldly prudence; nay, it may frequently be dangerous to liſten to the dictates of compaſſion: in every minute particular, the will of the Lord ſhould direct our plans.

The triumph of the king of Iſrael was ſuddenly turned into gloom by this ſolemn reprehenſion; but he ſtill retained the ſame unhumbled ſpirit, even under the rebuke of Heaven. Inſtead of imploring forgiveneſs, "he went to his houſe heavy and diſpleaſed," full of enmity againſt God and his prophet. The influence of divine grace will diſpoſe us to juſtify the ſentence, by which we are condemned. But "the haughtineſs of man" is unwilling to bow before God; and therefore ſinners are inclined to vindicate themſelves, to be ſullen and angry, and to quarrel with the declarations of God againſt them. Who can acquit himſelf in this matter?

matter? Have you not been forward to accuse your Judge, when you ought to have taken shame to yourselves? Have you not complained of the strictness and severity of His law? And when a faithful application has been made to your consciences by the ministers of Christ, has not the effect been the same, as with Ahab? Have you not "gone to your house heavy and displeased?"

Shall we, then, envy the monarch upon his throne? He had obtained a signal victory; but the wrath of God was kindled against him. He possessed a kingdom; but his own furious and vile passions rendered him extremely wretched. As if his whole dominion could not satisfy his desires, he fixed his eye upon a small vineyard, which he coveted as an addition to his garden*. But this was the paternal inheritance of another person, Naboth, who, it should seem, from a conscientious regard to the law of God†, refused on any terms to relinquish that, which descended to him from his ancestors, and which was entailed upon his family. A refusal from his own subject, the haughty prince could not bear; and merely because he could not obtain the accession he had longed for, being filled with rage and anguish he gave himself up to a sullen despondency.

What a striking picture does this exhibit, of the sin, the danger, and the misery of an envious, proud, and avaricious disposition! "Be content with such things as ye have‡." Some little enlargement of your income or your estate, you suppose, would quite satisfy

* 1 Kings, xxi. 1, &c. † Lev. xxv. 23. ‡ Heb. xiii. 5.

you,

you,' No: you deceive yourſelves: ſomething elſe would then be wanted. The rich and the powerful are as far from the ſummit of their wiſhes, as the moſt indigent. If you had Ahab's property, with Ahab's temper, you would be truly wretched. Why ſhould you not be ſatisfied, as you now are? Only pray, that you may enjoy the love and bleſſing of God with your poſſeſſions, and you will find, "a little that a righteous man hath, is better than the riches of many wicked *."

It rarely happens, that a perſon of a diſcontented, malignant ſpirit is not hurried away into ſchemes of villany, to accompliſh his object. Satan, probably, or ſome of his agents, will furniſh a plan, if you be diſpoſed to follow it. The infamous queen, Jezebel, contrived and effected the deſtruction of Naboth by the baſeſt perfidy, that ſhe might gratify the deſires of the king. Ahab, indeed, did not appear in that tranſaction; but he plainly conſented to it, and immediately ſeized upon the inheritance of his murdered ſubject. Although his wife might be the more obdurate offender, he himſelf was deſtitute of every good principle, and ready to comply with her iniquitous projects. The firſt propoſer of a crime is, doubtleſs, the moſt culpable; but he, who cheerfully joins as an accomplice, ſhall bear his own ſin. Nay, even he, who only approves the wickedneſs of another, and is willing to reap the advantage of it, is chargeable with a degree of guilt, which admits of no excuſe.

* Pſal. xxxvii. 16.

And

And what is the fruit of unjuſt gain? Does it give peace to the poſſeſſors, or anſwer their expectations? What was Ahab the better, for his much coveted vineyard? If he were deaf to the reproofs of conſcience, he was made to hear the ſentence of God from the mouth of Elijah, who arreſted him upon the very ſpot, and in the act of ſeizing the paternal eſtate of Naboth. The appearance of the prophet on ſuch an occaſion, excited in him the moſt painful feelings, and quite confounded him. Being inſtantly ſtruck with terror, as if he read his doom in the countenance of the man of God, he cried out, "Haſt thou found me, O mine enemy?" Alas! what could he look for, but an enemy, in the meſſenger of Jehovah? Elijah charged upon him the impious tranſaction of Naboth's murder, and predicted, that he, and his queen, and all his family, would ſhortly be cut off by violence.

How certainly does miſery attend the commiſſion of iniquity! And how vain are the hopes, which ſinners entertain, of ſecrecy or impunity! "Be ſure, your ſin will find you out." God is privy to all your purpoſes, and ſooner or later will overwhelm you with conſternation at the ſight of your own wickedneſs. It will be well, if the denunciations of vengeance drive you to repentance, that you may avoid the indignation, which is ready to fall upon you.

Was Ahab, then, a penitent? We might have ſuppoſed ſo, at the firſt appearance. When he heard his awful condemnation, "he rent his clothes, and put ſackcloth upon his fleſh, and faſted, and lay in ſackcloth, and went ſoftly." Doubtleſs he was alarmed; and

and by ſuch a conduct he made an open confeſſion of his ſin. But, whatever horrors of mind he felt, he experienced no real contrition, no abiding change; as the ſequel of the hiſtory will prove. Yet even this external humiliation procured him ſome temporal advantages. The Lord expreſſed a favourable notice of it, and declared, that the judgments ſhould be awhile delayed. The offender was reprieved, but not pardoned. A further trial was granted him; but the forbearance of God produced not its proper effects.

How aſtoniſhing is the divine patience toward thoſe, who remain impenitent! The Lord will regard the beginning, or even the outward ſigns, of converſion, rather than appear unwilling to receive a returning ſinner. Where profeſſions of ſorrow are made, he is often pleaſed to ſtay or to withdraw his hand from taking vengeance. Let us, therefore, bow at his footſtool, and confeſs our guilt before him. But "be not deceived; He is not mocked." No fair ſhew in the ſight of men can impoſe upon Him. You may be terrified at death, and under the dread of damnation may cry for mercy. You may aſſume the garb and the language of penitents, and yet continue in love and in league with ſin. Are there not thoſe, who lately expreſſed great diſtreſs, and an earneſt deſire of amendment, in the time of ſickneſs? And now when they are reſtored to health, and again put to the trial, is not the warning forgotten? Are not all their reſolutions broken? They do not, at leaſt, with the ſame fervour implore forgiveneſs, but, like Ahab, when they feel the rod removed, return to their former obduracy.

duracy. What, then, will be the iſſue? What, indeed, can be expected? Let us attend to the cloſe of this wicked life, which exhibits the diſſembler dying at laſt in contempt of God, and by his righteous judgment.

Years before Chriſt, 897. In conjunction with Jehoſhaphat, who had formed an alliance with him, he prepared for war againſt Syria *. At the inſtance of Jehoſhaphat, he pretended to conſult the Lord; but he called only for his idolatrous prieſts, whoſe approbation was eaſily obtained. Their compliant anſwers, however, did not ſatisfy Jehoſhaphat, who wiſhed for a prophet of Jehovah; and then Ahab obſerved, that there was a man of that character, Micaiah, whom he hated for his tremendous denunciations. We do not wonder at ſuch a declaration. Can the miniſters of God expect the love and favour of thoſe, whom they are conſtrained to warn and reprove? The preachers of the Goſpel muſt proclaim the terrors of the Lord without reſerve, and it is probable, that on this ground many of their hearers will quarrel with them. It is true, ſinners, they cannot "prophesy good concerning you, but evil." And ſhould you therefore hate them, as Ahab did Micaiah? Rather, hate and renounce your iniquity; and they will bring you a different meſſage.

We admire the courage and fidelity of Micaiah, who, at the hazard of his life, rebuked the king of Iſrael, and foretold his ſpeedy deſtruction in the propoſed expedition againſt the Syrians. Provoked by this bold

* 1 Kings, xxii. 2, &c.

addreſs,

address, the haughty prince cast him into prison, and, as in defiance of Jehovah and his prophet, rushed into the battle. Such an avowed opposition to the voice of God and his ministers is indeed an awful sign. We fear for those, who will not listen to admonitions. For "he that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy *."

Ahab had probably become more obdurate through his late reprieve, and promised himself a longer reign in his sins: and yet, as if he had some dread of the threatened danger, he disguised himself in the habit of a private soldier, and put on a coat of mail. But, though concealed from the observation of his enemies, the hand of God found him out. He was wounded by an arrow, shot "at a venture," but directed by unerring wisdom; and wounded in the very part, where alone he was vulnerable, "between the joints of the harness." He felt the approach of death, yet gave no signs of repentance, and expired the same evening. According to Elijah's prediction, the dogs licked up his blood; and the whole family was soon afterwards extirpated.

What a solemn narrative is this! O that it might have its proper effect upon careless sinners! You flatter yourselves, like Ahab, that the menaces of God will not be fulfilled: you hope to escape his judgment: but, with all your contrivances, you cannot fly from it. A more awful destruction, than that of Ahab in the battle, is prepared for you. Still you rush on, and,

* Prov. xxix. 1.

in ſpite of every warning, preſume that you ſhall not periſh. You are enraged with thoſe, who foretel your ruin: but they muſt continue to declare, "O wicked man, thou ſhalt ſurely die *." And ſoon "ſhall the right-aiming thunderbolts go abroad, and from the clouds, as from a well-drawn bow, ſhall they fly to the mark †."

Some, we truſt, from an apprehenſion of danger and a belief of the Goſpel, are ſeeking by humiliation and prayer to obtain deliverance. "Turn ye to the ſtrong hold, ye priſoners of hope ‡." Jeſus will graciouſly receive you, and ſecure you from the ſtorms of impending wrath. If you fly to Him for refuge, you ſhall never be confounded. When the deſtroying Angel ſhall go forth, and ſlay an innumerable company, you ſhall have a mark in your foreheads which will effectually preſerve you: and you ſhall enter into the joy of your Lord for ever.

* Ezek. xxxiii. 8. † Wiſd. v. 21. ‡ Zech. ix. 12.

JEHOSHAPHAT.

CHAP. VII.

Jehoshaphat, his excellent character—his attention to his kingdom—prospered under the divine blessing—joined affinity with Ahab—the bad consequences of that alliance—reproved and threatened—renewed his endeavours for the public good—miraculously delivered from confederate enemies—destroyed idolatry—again and again associated with the court of Israel—suffered for it.

WE have beheld with grief the low state of religion in the kingdom of Israel, and the awful departure both of the princes and the people from the Lord God of their fathers. We now turn our eyes to the other part of the land, and observe the posture of affairs in the kingdom of Judah. Here a more agreeable prospect opens upon us. Great corruptions, indeed, both in worship and in morals, prevailed. But it pleased God to raise up many pious rulers from the family of David, (in which, according to the promise, the succession to the throne of Judah was continued without interruption) and these, by a zealous exertion of their power, were the means of reviving the true knowledge and fear of God among their subjects.

The character, now proposed to us, belongs to this description, and stands eminently distinguished in the sacred

ſacred hiſtory. He was the ſon of the good king Aſa; and doubtleſs he owed much to the example and inſtructions of ſuch a father. O that the children of godly parents were duly ſenſible of their peculiar advantages, and anxious to improve them, as they ought, to the beſt purpoſes!

Years before Chriſt, 914. Jehoſhaphat, who was the fourth in lineal deſcent from Solomon, came to the crown at the time that Ahab reigned over Iſrael. For twenty-five years the nation enjoyed the bleſſing of his wiſe and upright government; and by his pious exhortations, as well as holy practice, they were taught and encouraged to walk in the way of righteouſneſs. How excellent, how lovely is true religion! From the view of ſuch a character, may we be excited to imitate, what we are conſtrained to admire!

Immediately upon his acceſſion, he diſcovered a prudent regard to the ſafety of his dominions, and put them in a proper poſture of defence*. But he was chiefly ſolicitous to promote the honour of God, and the ſpiritual intereſts of the people. He abhorred the corruptions of the neighbouring kingdom, and ſet himſelf to correct the abuſes, which obtained among his own ſubjects. He not only avowed himſelf the ſervant of Jehovah, but manifeſted a peculiar zeal, courage, and delight in his obedience to him. Grieved for the ignorance and profaneneſs which had ſpread throughout the land, he took the moſt effectual method to obviate and remove them. For he ſent Prieſts and Levites, accompanied by ſome of the principal officers

* 2 Chron. xvii. 1, &c.

of his court, to publiſh and explain the divine law from city to city. Thus the piety of the Church and the power of the State were united and exerted for the nobleſt purpoſes. The king of Judah, then, in his religious fervour, reſembled his illuſtrious anceſtor David, whoſe conduct, it ſhould ſeem, in the beſt parts of it, he propoſed for his own imitation.

Great were the advantages, which reſulted to Jehoſhaphat in particular, and to the nation at large. He ſoon became a proſperous, rich, and potent prince, and ſaw his ſubjects around him ſecure, peaceable and happy. He was recompenſed with the preſence and the bleſſing of that God, whom he ſerved; "The Lord was with him;" and to this cauſe we are taught to aſcribe the affluence, the honour, the ſtrength, and the tranquillity, which he enjoyed. The ſacred hiſtory requires us to acknowledge the hand of God in every event. "Not a ſparrow falls on the ground without Him." This is but little regarded: for are not the laws of nature, or thoſe unmeaning terms, fortune and chance, ſubſtituted in the place of the Divine Providence? And is not Jehovah nearly excluded by us from the government of his own world? He is not ſought to, for ſucceſs; and the praiſe of it is not given to Him, but to human diligence, foreſight, or good management; or if there be no pretence to any of theſe, it is referred to ſome lucky hit, of which no account can be rendered. O ſinners, we warn you not to preſume upon your abilities, nor to ſuppoſe that your ſchemes will certainly proſper, notwithſtanding your contempt of religion. The God of heaven, whom you

ſet at nought, may inſtantly defeat your beſt concerted plans, and turn them to confuſion.

How wonderful is the dominion which He excreiſes over us! He diſpoſes of all our concerns, according to his own pleaſure; but his interpoſition is not uſually viſible. He governs all our hearts, and accompliſhes his purpoſes, chiefly by this ſecret influence. Yet we are free; for we act agreeably to our own views, deſires, and paſſions. This powerful acceſs, which God has to the human mind, myſterious as it is, muſt be confeſſed in the hiſtory before us. Jehoſhaphat "had riches and honour in abundance;" and his ſubjects were inclined not only to obey him, but to bring him many preſents;—becauſe "the Lord ſtabliſhed the kingdom in his hand." He was not haraſſed by outward enemies, for they raiſed no war againſt him; but, if we would aſſign the reaſon, we muſt look higher than Jehoſhaphat, and obſerve a ſtrong and effectual reſtraint laid upon thoſe, who would otherwiſe have diſtreſſed him: "the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms round about." Nay, many of them, who ſeemed moſt unlikely, made large and voluntary offerings to him; ſo that his wealth and magnificence were increaſed exceedingly.

In this inſtance, then, at leaſt, the beauty and the advantages of real piety will be acknowledged. In every ſituation it is amiable and uſeful, but it is eſpecially ſo, when joined with authority. A zeal for truth and righteouſneſs among our governors, and active exertions for the propagation of the Goſpel, would produce the moſt beneficial effects, as tending

to revive the work of God in our land. Nor would this regard to religion be inimical to the temporal interests of the community, or contrary to sound politics. It would not prevent an attention to the security of our dominions. Forts might be built, garrisons established, numerous armies maintained, and large business transacted, as in the realm of Jehoshaphat. A better consideration, however, than that of all human means of protection, is, "The Lord would be our defence; the Holy One of Israel our king."

But not merely are pious rulers an extensive blessing; all lively, exemplary Christians are so, as far as their influence can reach. It is incumbent upon us all, to employ what talents we have, for the honour of God and the salvation of souls. You are ready to remark, probably, how much good others might do, who possess more power, and how much you yourselves would do, with their abilities. Alas! you know not your own hearts. Why are you not "faithful in that which is little?" Have you set up the worship of God in your houses? Though you preside not, as Jehoshaphat, over a kingdom, is not the charge of a family important? And why should not you instruct your domestics, as he did his subjects, in "the book of the law of the Lord?" But be consistent, as he was: do not recommend one thing, and practise another. Begin, therefore, with yourselves: "seek to the Lord God of Israel," and then call upon your children and servants to follow your example.

Are you afraid, that by such a conduct you shall incur hatred and opposition, and thus injure your temporal

ral concerns? Be it ſo: care not for it: You will ſuffer in a glorious cauſe, and receive an hundred fold reward. But your fears may magnify your danger. The Lord will give you as much of the good things of this life, as is expedient for you: for "both riches and honour come of Him." We do not exhort you to enter upon a religious courſe from the mercenary expectation of worldly proſperity: yet the faithful ſervants of Chriſt frequently obtain even preſent advantages, which more than counterbalance all their loſſes. Of this at leaſt be aſſured, and it ought to ſatisfy you, the Lord will be with you, as He was with Jehoſhaphat.

Years before Chriſt, 897. But no human character is perfect: in this eminent prince a ſad defect was found. Ah! how mortifying to our pride is the conſideration of that ſtrength of depravity, which remains in the moſt excellent of the earth! Yet Jehoſhaphat's offence conſiſted not in the commiſſion of any groſs iniquity. Doubtleſs, he acted in a diſhonourable and incongruous manner, if we regard his religious profeſſions. Though he had diſcovered ſuch amazing firmneſs in oppoſing idolatry, he was induced, probably from worldly motives, to form a connection with idolaters. Strange indeed, that he ſhould go ſo contrary to his own principles, and to his general conduct! But every believer feels that within himſelf, which will account for ſuch unſteadineſs in others; for he ſays, "The evil, which I would not, that I do*."

* Rom. vii. 19.

Perhaps his riches and his honours were a ſnare to him. We know, at leaſt, the danger of proſperity; for it uſually puffs up the mind, and ſuggeſts plans for further exaltation, which are very unfavourable to real piety. "Jehoſhaphat joined affinity with Ahab*," the wicked ruler of Iſrael. He married his ſon Jehoram to Athaliah the daughter of Ahab. Perhaps he did this from abſurd maxims of policy; it might be from the expectation of uniting the two kingdoms again under his own poſterity. But it was diſpleaſing to God, extremely hurtful to himſelf, and a miſchievous example to his ſubjects. Alliances of this kind, with ſuch as have no true regard to God, have been fatal to thouſands, who once appeared eminent in religion. Little harm may be apprehended from them; for it is generally ſuppoſed at firſt, that the acquaintance between the two families need not be very intimate. But one thing inſenſibly leads on to another; and if you make any advance to conciliate the favour of profane perſons, you will probably be drawn into familiarities and compliances with them, which once you would have abhorred.

Intermarriages will naturally produce an intercourſe between the parents of the reſpective parties. Jehoſhaphat viſited Ahab; and, whilſt they were feaſting together, the king of Judah conſented to join his forces with Ahab, and to accompany him to battle againſt Syria. He did not, indeed, renounce or conceal his religion in that wicked court; for he adviſed, that they ſhould conſult the word of the Lord. But alas! how

* 2 Chron. xviii. 1, &c.

how vain to think of enquiring of God in ſuch an houſe! Four hundred of the idolatrous prieſts of Baal were introduced, and Jehoſhaphat was compelled to hear their flatteries and their lies. Probably, he felt diſguſt, and therefore deſired, that Micaiah, the faithful prophet of Jehovah, might be ſent for; but he could have little ſatisfaction, while he ſaw the man of God and his meſſage derided, and could ſcarcely ſpeak in his behalf.

You plead in favour of alliances with worldly perſons, that your uſefulneſs may be thereby extended; ſince you may draw thoſe over to the ſervice of God, who are now prejudiced againſt it. But does not the contrary effect more uſually take place? It is not ſo likely, that you will profit them, as that they will hurt you. If you cultivate an intimacy with them, you will be led to make ſacrifices, which your conſciences condemn: at leaſt, you muſt often be ſilent, when your mouth ſhould be open to bear witneſs for God. O beware, leſt you wound, if not deſtroy, your ſouls, in compliment to them!

Prudential motives are alleged; and it is aſked, Why ſhould we give up the proſpect of great advantage?——It requires no proof, ſurely, that to violate a plain duty from a regard to gain is an avowed rejection of God. But it deſerves our notice, that thoſe, who embark in any wrong ſcheme from lucrative or ambitious views, are generally diſappointed.——Jehoſhaphat accompanied Ahab to the battle, in direct oppoſition to the Lord's prophet; and there his life was expoſed to the moſt imminent danger, and reſcued

from the aſſaults of the Syrians, only by a miracle. The Lord ſuffered him to come into the utmoſt extremity, to convince him of his guilt, and then interpoſed for his deliverance. While the enemy compaſſed him about to kill him, "he cried out, and the Lord helped him; and GOD MOVED THEM to depart from him." He was permitted to eſcape: but what profit had he received from his viſit? The Lord, who ſpared him in mercy, ſent a very ſolemn reproof to him, and a denunciation of wrath, for aſſociating with the ungodly*.——The ſaints are puniſhed for their miſconduct, but not finally deſtroyed, as the wicked are. And do we not obſerve, by the awful reprehenſion and chaſtiſement of this upright and eminent ſervant of God, that the peculiar ſin, into which he fell, is moſt hateful and pernicious?

Jehoſhaphat returned to his duty, and, by a vigilant attention to his proper work, endeavoured to repair the miſchief, which his familiarity with Ahab, poſſibly, produced in the nation. It ſhould ſeem, that a conſiderable declenſion had taken place. Alas! how ready are ſinners to throw off reſtraint, when pious rulers or teachers ſlacken their diligence, and are themſelves betrayed into wrong conduct! The king of Judah, then, ſet himſelf again to reform his ſubjects, with the ſame holy ardour as before. He attended in perſon to correct abuſes, and to deliver inſtructions. Nor were his labours vain: "He brought back the people to the Lord God of their fathers." The regular and impartial adminiſtration of juſtice, alſo, through

* 2 Chron. xix. 1, &c.

every

every part of the land, engaged his serious regard. He appointed judges and officers, and charged them to execute their trust faithfully, as in the presence of God.——How desirable is it to see those, who have declined, effectually recovered, and proving their recovery by a zealous and strict performance of their duty in their different situations of life! Enough remains for each of us to do; especially as much harm may have arisen from our former negligence: and though we cannot expiate our past iniquity, yet the remembrance of it should excite us to double diligence in the work of God.

The king of Judah, who had been threatened with the divine displeasure, was soon made to know, that his safety depended upon God alone, without whose protection he must have been overwhelmed by his confederate enemies. A numerous host of Moabites, Ammonites, and others, invaded his land, and threw him into the utmost consternation*. Then, probably, he felt shame and distress for his sin, as well as dread on account of his danger. But let us observe in him a remarkable pattern of humiliation, faith, and devotion. Though perplexed, he did not lie down in despair, but first "set himself to seek the Lord," and afterward called upon all his people to do the same. "He proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah; and they gathered themselves out of all the cities to ask help of the Lord." In this large and solemn assembly the prince himself presided, and, as the mouth of the congregation, prayed aloud unto God before them all, with singular fervour.

* 2 Chron. xx. 1, &c.

Deeply

Deeply ſenſible of their entire dependence upon God, the ſovereign and omnipotent diſpoſer of all the kingdoms of the world, he pleaded the Lord's peculiar relation to them, and former mercies beſtowed upon them; and then repreſenting their diſtreſs, and profeſſing a full reliance upon Him, he entreated his favourable interpoſition.

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, ſlow to anger, and plenteous in mercy: He will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever *." Jehoſhaphat, therefore, received an anſwer of peace: for a prophet was immediately commiſſioned to encourage both the prince and all his ſubjects, and to aſſure them that on the very next day, 'if they would go forth in faith to meet their enemies, they ſhould obtain a complete victory without an engagement. Jehoſhaphat believed, worſhipped, and praiſed God. In obedience to the divine mandate, he prepared his people, and exhorted them to truſt the Lord, to expect his promiſed aid, and to extol Him "whoſe mercy endureth for ever." He himſelf led them out to the field, whither they advanced with hymns of loud thankſgivings to God, as if ſhouting for the conqueſt. In an inſtant the combined armies were confounded, and, like perſons ſeized with a phrenſy, they deſtroyed each other. Was there ever a more exemplary proof of the efficacy of prayer and faith in God? How viſible was his interpoſition in behalf of his ſervants, who had only to "ſtand ſtill and ſee his ſalvation!" To Him, therefore, the glory was devoutly aſcribed; for the men of

* Pſalm ciii. 8, 9.

Judah,

Judah, conducted by their prince, returned, as they went, with ſongs of joy, confeſſing that "the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies." The hand of God appeared ſo manifeſtly in this event, that all the ſurrounding nations, being ſtruck with awe, no more dared to repeat their hoſtilities. To the divine influence, then, exerted upon the minds of his adverſaries, and not to his own wiſdom or courage, Jehoſhaphat was indebted for the quiet, which he afterwards enjoyed.

How ſingular is the whole of this tranſaction! How inſtructive a pattern do we behold in the pious king of Judah! Backſliders, who are puniſhed for their offences, may be encouraged from him to renew their application to the throne of grace, and maintain their hope in God. You may be brought into ſo great perils, that an eſcape may ſeem impoſſible; but when like Jehoſhaphat you "know not what to do," lift up your eyes to the Father of all mercies, and wait for His ſalvation. Only come with unfeigned penitence, and reſt with compoſure and firmneſs on His promiſes for help. Go forth with joy and confidence in Him, and believe that it will be, as He hath ſaid. You ſhall not be diſappointed: for, when you find no refuge, He will diſplay his power, faithfulneſs, and love on your behalf.

How glorious, then, does our God appear! "His compaſſions fail not."——"Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath ſmitten, and He will bind us up."—"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven

and

and earth*." In our deepeſt diſtreſſes and moſt imminent dangers, when all viſible means of ſafety are removed, we will truſt in Him, and not be afraid. For "behold, the Lord's hand is not ſhortened, that it cannot ſave; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear†." Faith grounds its expectation, not on human probabilities, but on the declarations of Jehovah: and it ſhould be remembered, that the moſt remarkable deliverances of the Church have been effected, either without the aid of men, or with ſuch as in itſelf would be weak and contemptible. Thus it is undeniable, that "ſalvation is of the Lord;" and hereby He ſecures the whole glory to Himſelf.

What, though your enemies be ſtrong and furious: they are all under his control, and He will repreſs their violence, as He pleaſes, to fulfil his own purpoſes. "Surely, the wrath of man ſhall praiſe Thee; the remainder of wrath ſhalt Thou reſtrain‡."—If, then, we enjoy peace and comfort in our nation, our neighbourhood, or our families, we know to whom we are indebted; and we praiſe our God, who has given us this reſt.

Jehoſhaphat continued, as a wiſe and pious ruler, to enforce among his ſubjects an attention to the ſervice, and an obedience to the law, of God. Doubtleſs, he was extenſively uſeful; but though he did much, he could not do all that he deſired. He had deſtroyed idolatry, and put away the Sodomites, and other abominations, out of the land; but the people could not

* Lam. iii. 22. Hoſ. vi. 1. Pſal. cxxiv. 8. † Iſa. lix. 1.
‡ Pſal. lxxvi. 10.

be

be prevailed on to forſake the high places, where religious rites were performed to the true God. Perhaps, he had not courage to correct this irregularity; or it might not be prudent to attempt it, on account of the extreme degeneracy of the nation. We ſhould not expect every thing from the beſt of men. Conſidering the ſtate of human nature, we rejoice in any degree of amendment, and wonder not that no more good is effected. Many difficulties will occur, to impede the progreſs and full eſtabliſhment of reformation: but "ariſe, and be doing, and the Lord will be with you." "Be always abounding in the work of the Lord, foraſmuch as ye know, that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

We are again obliged to cenſure this very excellent king, becauſe the ſacred writers have done it. He had been reproved and puniſhed for his intimacy with Ahab, and yet he relapſed, by forming another connection in the ſame irreligious family, with the ſon and ſucceſſor of Ahab. Even after that aſtoniſhing deliverance which God had wrought for him, and though he had ſmarted for his late folly, we find him joining in a commercial treaty with Ahaziah, who, like his father, was a very profane character. They deſigned to ſend a trading fleet, which they had equipped, to the eaſt, and to ſhare the profits. But God, in mercy to Jehoſhaphat, blaſted the ſcheme, and fruſtrated his hopes of gain. His ſhips were deſtroyed in the port; and a prophet of Jehovah declared, that this was appointed as a chaſtiſement for his attachment to that wicked houſe. Thus the alliance was broken; and the divine

rebuke had its proper effect, at least for the season; for, though urged by the king of Israel, he peremptorily refused to renew the compact*.——If we have departed from God, and be recovered even by the severest corrections, let us be thankful for any losses, which may have prevented the loss of our immortal souls: let us praise the Lord, who sought after us, and left us not to perish in our sins.

But how strong is the tendency of our nature to evil! How prone are the most holy men to yield to those very corruptions, which they seem to have renounced and overcome! Some time after the last transaction, we find Jehoshaphat once more in confederacy with the profane court of Israel, and joining in a warlike expedition with Jehoram, as he had done with Ahab†. Here again he was reduced to extreme difficulties, and rescued as before, by the Lord's interposition. Doubtless, he maintained his integrity to the end; but we see his weakness, and tremble for ourselves. He was, probably, of an easy, compliant humour, and unwilling to disoblige his friends. The first wrong step was, his taking a wife for his son from such a family; as this paved the way for all the subsequent mischiefs. If induced to it by the prospect of advantage, he was utterly disappointed. Much he suffered in his own person, and many calamities happened to his descendants, in consequence of this affinity. His immediate successor, Jehoram, who married Ahab's daughter, proved a detestable character: that wicked woman

* 1 Kings xxii. 49. † 2 Kings iii. 7, &c.

attempted to extirpate all his posterity; and one child only was preserved, in a wonderful manner*.

Ah! what complicated miseries follow from, what may seem, a trifling instance of misconduct! Believers, think not yourselves secure: especially, if you feel a disposition to be kind, beware of a conformity to the world. Your placid temper, which is truly amiable, exposes you to peculiar snares. Consider at least, what is "the sin, which doth so easily beset you." Though you have renounced it, and suppose yourselves free from its assaults, it will continually recur, and solicit fresh indulgence. Your flesh, in one way or another, will maintain the conflict, till you lay down your earthly tabernacles in the dust.

But let not the weakness of Jehoshaphat, or of any other saint, be alleged in justification of those, who are entirely "of the flesh, and do mind the things of the flesh." Your compliances are not merely occasional, or such as you are unwillingly drawn into, by surprise or violence of temptation. They suit your disposition, and constitute your settled rule of conduct. Your case then, is very different from theirs, who "are not of the world, but chosen out of it." The separation, to which they are called, is what you would dread as the heaviest misfortune. "Ye adulterers, and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God †."

* 2 Chron. xxi. 6. xxii. 10, &c.

† James iv. 4.

ELIJAH.

CHAP. VIII.

SECT. I.

Elijah, an extraordinary prophet—warned the Israelites—threatened Ahab with a drought—protected from his rage—fed by ravens—sent to a poor widow at Zarephath—raised her son to life—again reproved Ahab—confounded the worshippers of Baal, and slew the idolatrous priests.

How vain are all worldly pomps and distinctions, however eagerly coveted and pursued! Are they not frequently bestowed on men of the basest character, and withheld from those, who are, decidedly, the favourites of Heaven? We are expressly told, that some eminent saints "wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented." Had we, indeed, been witnesses of all that contempt and variety of distress, which they experienced, while "they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth," we might have concluded against them. But we hear the testimony of an infallible judge, "Of these the world was not worthy*;" they were, of all others, dearest to God, his most

* Heb. xi. 37, 38.

faithful

faithful servants, and the brightest ornaments of his Church; and very shortly they will appear with peculiar lustre in the kingdom of his glory.

This description, probably, may be applicable to many ancient believers. We know One such instance at least: Elijah, who stands among the foremost in the list of scripture worthies, is exactly characterized by it.

Next to Moses, perhaps, he is the most extraordinary prophet, whose life is recorded in the old testament. There was indeed a strong likeness between these two, in various particulars; and they were both selected for the distinguished honour of attending our Lord on the mount of transfiguration: "they appeared in glory, talking with Him, and spake of his decease, which He should accomplish at Jerusalem*."——It will be recollected, also, that a person of great eminence in the new testament is compared to Elijah. John the Baptist, who was foretold by his very name, is described as a man of the same spirit, of a similar habit and appearance, alike abstemious and abstracted from society, alike firm and undaunted in maintaining the cause of God†. Many important lessons of instruction, doubtless, may be derived from the example before us. But his office and situation were so singular, that in some circumstances, we allow, he cannot properly be proposed as a pattern for exact imitation, so much as a subject of our devout wonder and admiration. Throughout the whole of his most interesting life, we observe him employed as the immediate mes-

* Luke ix. 30, 31. † 2 Kings i. 8. Mal. iv. 5. Matt. iii. 4. xi. 14. xvii. 12. Luke i. 17.

 senger

ſenger of Heaven, and ſupported, by a continued ſeries of miracles, under ſome afflictive diſpenſations of Providence and great violence of perſecution. Let us glorify God in him.

He was ſent to the rebellious houſe of Iſrael, to reprove them for their departure from the Lord, to vindicate the honour of his law, and to reſtore his ſervice. Though clothed in mean apparel, with what majeſty and authority did he ſpeak and act! He called ſinners to repentance, rebuking and exhorting; and, without dreading the wrath of the king, he denounced, and even executed, the judgments of God againſt him and his ſubjects. We admire the patience and mercy of our God in viſiting that people, ſo generally corrupt and abandoned, and in raiſing up ſuch an one to maintain his truth among them. And do we not praiſe Him for his goodneſs in waiting upon us by the miniſtry of the Goſpel, amidſt ſuch univerſal depravity and contempt of Himſelf? We acknowledge, to the glory of his grace, that He has ſent among us many faithful witneſſes, whom he has ſupported and proſpered, for the revival of his work in this ſinful and adulterous generation.

Years before Christ, about 910. Elijah is introduced in the ſacred hiſtory without any mention of his parentage or extraction. In the firſt account, which is given of him, we find him delivering an unwelcome meſſage from the Lord to the king of Iſrael, and threatening a drought upon the land*. We apprehend, that many former warnings had been deſpiſed, and that this judg-

* 1 Kings xvii. 1, &c.

ment was inflicted as a punishment, both on the prince and the people, for their rejection of the prophet. They were taught, that he had received his commission from Heaven, when they saw the rain granted or withheld according to his word.——The God of nature, with uncontrolable authority, rules over all. The various hosts of creatures are at his command; and when He shall direct, they are ready to go forth as the executioners of his vengeance, to chastise or destroy ungodly sinners. The rain falls not by chance, but by his appointment; and very frequently "He turneth a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein." The scornful treatment of his ministers, especially, will be sure to rouse his indignation.

For three years and a half, "the heaven was shut up, and great famine was throughout all the land*." It is almost inconceivable, how terrible the effects must have been: and yet the people remained impenitent. Ahab, and his queen Jezebel, if not his subjects in general, instead of turning to the Lord with contrition, sought the life of the prophet, as if he, and not their own guilt, had occasioned their calamities. But he was protected from their rage, and supported by a continued miracle, though he could not but partake of the public distress. The very course of nature was overruled, that his bread might not fail: and yet it pleased God to put his faith and obedience constantly to the trial, and to require the most decisive evidence of his sincerity, in the most difficult circumstances.

* Luke iv. 25.

He commanded him to fly to a confiderable diftance, and for a time to feparate himfelf from all fociety, affuring him, that a little brook, where he fhould lie concealed, would furnifh him with water, and that the ravens fhould be commiffioned to bring him food. He believed the word, and complied with this extraordinary direction; nor did the promife difappoint him: he drank of the brook, and the birds of prey brought him regular fupplies of bread and flefh. In that retired fituation, he feemed to be cut off from all public ufefulnefs; but doubtlefs he enjoyed fweet intercourfe with God, and offered up fervent prayer for the converfion of his impenitent country. We perceive and admire the peculiar energy of that faith, which enabled him day after day to expect his maintenance in a way the moft improbable. For how ftrange, that the very ravens fhould act fo contrary to their nature, as to forego their own indulgence, and minifter to the relief of the prophet!

Are we alfo ready to go, wherever the Lord fhall call? Ah! what fears and apprehenfions would diftract our minds in fimilar circumftances! But, though the external means of fubfiftence appear to be at our command, faith was not more neceffary for Elijah, than it is for us: we fhould ftill live, from day to day, dependent upon the God of providence for our daily bread. Has not He fuftained us hitherto in a wonderful manner? Are we not as much indebted to Him for our fupport, as if we had been fed by a miracle? Perhaps, we have been affifted by thofe perfons, who feemed as unlikely to be kind, as the very ravens. In many

many inſtances we have found men of a fierce and greedy diſpoſition, reſiſting, as it were, the impulſe of their nature, renounce their own advantages, and diſcover an uncommon tenderneſs and regard towards the deſpiſed and perſecuted ſervants of the Lord. Surely, this ought to be aſcribed to His powerful influence, exerted on the behalf of thoſe, whom He has engaged to protect.

After ſome time, the faith of Elijah was tried in a different way. The brook, which had ſupplied him with water, dried up, and his ſituation, therefore, became untenable. However, the Lord, who ſtill extended the ſame care toward him, directed him to go to Zarephath, a town of Phenicia, and aſſured him, that a poor widow of Gentile extraction would ſupport him, though baniſhed from his own country. Many objections might ariſe in his mind; but he obeyed the command, and obtained the promiſed help.—May We poſſeſs a ſimilar truſt and ſubmiſſion! For what have we to do, but to follow our Guide, though we know not whither He leads us? If, inſtead of this unreſerved reliance upon Him, we queſtion the propriety of his appointments, and "conſult with fleſh and blood," we ſhall probably be tempted to take a wrong courſe, and thereby be involved in innumerable difficulties.

When the prophet reached the end of his journey, the way was prepared for his reception. The very woman, whom he ſought, came out of the city juſt as he arrived there; and perhaps it had been intimated to her, that, notwithſtanding her diſtreſſes, ſhe muſt en-

tertain this ſingular gueſt. He found her gathering a few ſticks, in order to bake her laſt handful of meal for herſelf and her ſon, expecting that they muſt ſhortly periſh with hunger. Surely, he could not aſk relief from one in ſuch circumſtances. But, having an infallible word to depend on, he entreated her to miniſter unto him out of her ſmall pittance, and aſſured her from the Lord, that her wants ſhould be ſupplied, though inviſibly. This, doubtleſs, proved a ſevere trial to her, and remarkably diſplayed her faith and piety. She complied with the requiſition, and obtained a recompence for her obedience. Long time ſhe and her family, together with the prophet, were miraculouſly ſupported. It might ſeem to them continually, that they were eating their laſt morſel; but there ſtill remained ſecret reſources, ſo that "the barrel of meal waſted not, neither did the cruſe of oil fail."

The ſame kind of interpoſition may not be granted to us. But why do we enquire with ſo much perplexity, "What ſhall we eat? or what ſhall we drink?" Seek firſt the kingdom of God and his righteouſneſs, and all other things, needful or expedient, ſhall be added unto you. What means your unbelief? Has God forgotten to be gracious, or violated his word? Does not He ſtill feed the fowls of the air? And, ſince the fulneſs of the earth is His, has he not a thouſand ways of relieving your neceſſities?

Do any perſons wonder, that Elijah was ſent to a Sidonian, rather than to any of the families of Iſrael? Our Lord has taught us, from this very inſtance, to beware of truſting to our religious privileges, leſt others

others with inferior advantages ſhould obtain the preference *. We ſhould alſo fear to deſpiſe the miniſters of God, leſt we be puniſhed by their utter removal. The Goſpel itſelf may be taken from us, and given to another people. For the Lord God acts in a ſovereign manner: He beſtows and withdraws his favours, where and when He pleaſes.

During Elijah's reſidence with the widow, her ſon ſickened and died. The poor diſtreſſed mother, under deep convictions of her guilt, conſidered the calamity as a judgment inflicted upon her by the prophet, and with ſome impatience deſired him to depart, as if ſhe was not able to ſtand in his preſence. This afflictive circumſtance ſeemed at firſt to ſtagger his faith. But, in anſwer to his very fervent prayer, the child revived. Thus the Lord put a freſh and diſtinguiſhed honour upon him, as well as magnified his own power. Before that time, no ſuch miracle, that we know of, had ever been wrought upon the earth; and in this view, we cannot conceive a more illuſtrious inſtance of dependence upon God, than that of Elijah, who could aſk and confidently expect ſuch an event to take place.

Years before Chriſt, about 906. Elijah's long continuance at Zarephath, probably, gave him ſome opportunities of uſefulneſs in that city, and his retirement might prove a peculiar bleſſing to himſelf, and tend to qualify him for more public ſervices. At length, the Lord directed him to quit this retreat, and go to the Court of Ahab, intimating that He would ſhortly deliver Iſ-

* Luke iv. 25.

rael from the miseries of the famine*. But how should he dare to stand before that impious prince, who, with a murderous rage, had sought him from kingdom to kingdom, that he might destroy him? His courage, however, did not fail, nor did he decline the perilous commission. He went without reluctance, and has thereby furnished us with an example of obedience, zeal, and fidelity, in the prospect of difficulties, dangers, and death.

Upon meeting with the prophet, Ahab began vehemently to accuse him as the troubler of Israel. But Elijah repelled the charge, and turned it against the king himself. With an uncommon intrepidity, he reproved the furious persecutor, and ascribed all the miseries of the land to that infamous system of idolatry, which Ahab and his family had adopted. He also desired him to summon all the priests of Baal, that, in their presence and to their utter confusion, he might evince Jehovah to be the true God, and the only proper object of their worship. It is probable, that Ahab had formed some scheme of violence against Elijah; but he relinquished his purpose, and instantly complied with his request.

Upon mount Carmel, then, where the numerous assembly met together, the important contest was to be decided. In Baal's interest were four hundred and fifty priests, besides the king and many of his subjects. On the part of Jehovah, there was none but Elijah: and yet, though he stood alone, he possessed an unshaken courage, and displayed a peculiar majesty in his deport-

* 1 Kings xviii. 1, &c.

ment.

ment. He made his appeal to the people, boldly rebuking them for their wavering mind, and entreating them to acknowledge Him for their God, whose Deity should be proved. He proposed, therefore, that a sacrifice should be offered on each side, and, in firm dependence on the God of heaven, by whose commission he acted, he agreed to rest the cause on this single circumstance, "The God, that answereth by fire, let Him be God.".

When the idolatrous priests had long waited in vain for Baal's interposition, Elijah, with severest irony, ridiculed their foolish expectations, and then, with a holy fervour, addressed himself to the Lord God of their fathers. He prayed, that He would determine the contest, and so manifest his own glory to that nation, that they might be effectually recovered from their apostasy. The answer was immediate: the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the sacrifice: the worshippers of Baal were confounded; and the congregation in general so struck with awe, that they prostrated themselves on the ground, and cried out, "The Lord, He is the God; The Lord, He is the God."—While they were under this strong conviction, Elijah took the opportunity, and, as if he had been possessed of the supreme authority, commanded the idolatrous ministers to be slain, according to the divine law; and such was the impression produced, that neither the king nor any of the people objected to the measure.

What an honour does God usually put upon his faithful servants! Even in the midst of their bitterest enemies, He is often pleased to wipe away their reproach,

proach, and make them appear highly reſpectable. Let none, therefore, fear to obey Him, or to enter on the moſt arduous duties, to which He may call them. It is our part, to go forth at his word, and to look unto Him for ſtrength and protection. The ambaſſadors of Chriſt, more eſpecially, ſhould ſtudy this example, and they will be animated to a vigorous diſcharge of their office. Does their place require them to ſtand before great men? Even there they muſt declare the truth of God, and boldly rebuke ſin, whoever may be offended by it. It will be nothing new, indeed, if they be reviled, as the diſturbers of ſociety. But to be intimidated in the performance of their work, or to make any mean compliances, through the dread of oppoſition, is extremely diſgraceful to their ſacred character. Let them cheerfully commit themſelves to Him, whom they ſerve, and probably they will find their difficulties removed, in a way they could not have conceived. The proudeſt perſecutors may be conſtrained to reverence them, to relinquiſh their ſchemes of violence againſt them, and even to grant all their requeſts. What, though the miniſter of Chriſt be ſurrounded by numbers of the great, the honourable, and the learned, who are imbittered againſt him; he is engaged in a good cauſe, has a powerful Advocate on his ſide, and therefore may confidently expect a happy iſſue. The multitudes about him, who are contrary to God and his truth, ſhould not terrify him, but rather increaſe his ardour. Though he have none to ſtrengthen his hands, let him endeavour, even ſingly, to ſtem the torrent of iniquity, and, in deep concern for the pre-

vailing

vailing ignorance and wickedneſs of the world, let him pour out his heart in fervent prayer for the advancement of real piety.

How often has the Lord interpoſed, to make himſelf known upon the earth, and to confound the oppoſers of religion! Surely, we ſhould hereby be encouraged to ſupplicate and expect his gracious exertions for the ſupport of his Goſpel in our own day. But where is the zeal of Elijah? Who is ready to "ſtand in the gap," while profaneneſs ſpreads and triumphs through our land? Are not thoſe, who ſhould be the foremoſt in the great work of reformation, conſulting their own eaſe, their reputation, and preſent advantages, and tamely conforming to the vices of the times, rather than manfully reproving them?—May God pour out his Spirit upon all thoſe, who are put into the miniſtry, and make them like-minded with this holy prophet, firm and diſintereſted, bold and vigorous; that by their means He may eſtabliſh righteouſneſs in the earth, and ſubdue ſinners to the obedience of faith!

ELIJAH.

SECT. 2.

Elijah obtained rain by prayer—fled for his life—wished to die—had a singular revelation at Horeb—anointed Elisha—pronounced sentence upon Ahab, in Naboth's vineyard—reproved Ahaziah's servants—called down fire from heaven—visited the schools of the prophets—divided Jordan—was taken up to heaven.

MISERY has been, invariably, the fruit of sin. A righteous God, jealous for the honour of his law, chastises nations as well as individuals. But He is ready to sheathe the sword of his justice, when the most heinous offenders even seem to return to Him with repentance. The ministers of his word, will rejoice to promote this event, and will therefore be importunate in their addresses to Heaven for the people of their charge.—Such are the reflections, which arise from this part of the very singular history of Elijah.

Years before Christ, 906. The kingdom had been long afflicted by a famine, through the visitation of an angry God, for their rejection of the true religion. But at length the Israelites consented to put away their idolatry, when they saw the priests of Baal utterly confounded by the prophet of Jehovah*. Immediately the

* 1 Kings xviii.

Lord

Lord intimated his design of removing their calamity: and Elijah, who had declared that the drought should soon be terminated, retired to pray; for the blessing was to be given in answer to his ardent supplications. He had the most confident expectations of obtaining the wished-for relief; but for some time he perceived no appearance of its approach. He did not cease, however, from his earnest intercession, till the heavens poured down rain, and refreshed the parched ground. From this example we are taught, that " the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*." But, like Elijah, we should ask in faith, and continue our petitions, till we receive the promised mercy.

Elijah accompanied the king, with all proper deference, upon his return to Jezreel, intending, probably, to prosecute the work of reformation, and hoping that the late miraculous interposition would give him an extensive influence. But no sooner did he arrive there, than he heard of the queen's determination to put him to death †. Upon this occasion the firmness of the prophet failed him: for he betrayed sad symptoms of impatience, cowardice, and unbelief. Hereby he proved, that he " was a man subject to like passions as we are," and that the most eminent saints possess neither confidence nor courage, any farther than the grace of God upholds them.

We apprehend, that he should have stood his ground, in full assurance of the divine protection. But he fled with precipitation and terror, and, leaving his servant

* James v. 16—18. † 1 Kings xix. 2, &c.

at

at the extremity of the country, retired without an attendant into the wilderness, where the Israelites had wandered forty years. There, being exhausted with hunger and fatigue, and harassed with murmuring and distrusting thoughts, concluding too, that all further attempts to reform that sinful generation would be utterly fruitless, he requested of God, to be dismissed from his office and from life itself.

What shall we say to this weakness, in such an exalted character? His situation, doubtless, was distressing; but he had endured severer trials, and the recollection of former deliverances should have encouraged his hope. Alas! we shall be borne down by the most inconsiderable attack, if we possess no better strength than our own. The steadfastness, we have hitherto shewn, will be no security to us in time to come. In every new danger we are apt to forget our past mercies, and give way to unbelief and despondency. But shall we desert our place or employment, and complain of our existence, merely because some powerful enemy threatens us? The Lord God, whom we serve, is able to protect and prosper us, in spite of all the machinations, which can be formed against us. If He be pleased to continue our lives, we should rejoice to fulfil the part, which He has assigned us, whatever we may suffer by it: nor should we be very solicitous to get out of our troubles. There are those, who from the noblest principles may "have a desire to depart," that they may see God as he is, and be made like unto him in holiness. But to be weary of the world, because we are afflicted, or to dread the consequences of faithfully dis-

charging

charging our duty, so as to "request for ourselves that we may die," surely this is our infirmity, and highly dishonourable in those, who profess to trust in the living God.

The Lord, who compassionates the weakness of his people, appeared to comfort the drooping mind of the prophet. He, who had before commanded the ravens and the widow to support him, now sent an Angel to provide him food: and by the strength of that meat Elijah remained in the wilderness forty days, like his predecessor Moses, without any further supplies. The Lord has innumerable ways of relieving or preventing the wants of his creatures. "Man doth not live by bread only*." The same hand, which made us, can sustain us without the intervention of any nutriment at all.

Elijah came at length to Horeb "the mount of God," which had been signalized by the revelations there delivered to Moses. In that very place, it pleased the Lord again to manifest his glorious majesty, as He had done to his servant of old. The solemn enquiry was proposed to the prophet by a voice from heaven, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" He replied, with an appearance of peevishness, in his own justification, that he had stood alone in defence of true religion, that his most zealous exertions had been vain, and that he was flying with imminent peril of his life. He seems not to have been impressed with a proper reverence for the divine authority; and therefore an exhibition of great terror was made to pass before him, that he might

* Deut. viii. 3.

know

know with what a God he had to do. Immediately a violent wind rent the mountains and brake the rocks in pieces; the earth ſhook and was removed; and a glorious light, by means of a miraculous fire, ſhone from heaven. By theſe awful tokens the Lord manifeſted his power, perhaps his diſpleaſure too. But he diſplayed his gracious preſence by a ſtill ſmall voice. Thus alſo He is pleaſed to reveal himſelf to us. We praiſe his condeſcenſion and his mercy. We perceive ſomething of his tremendous majeſty and fiery indignation, in the thunders of his law; but the mild language of the Goſpel, wherein He addreſſes us, diſſipates our fears, and emboldens us to approach Him.

Elijah ſtood with profound veneration before his God; but when enquired of as at firſt, perhaps not even then ſufficiently humbled, or convinced of his fault in flying from his place, he alleged the very ſame excuſe. Alas! how forward we are to juſtify ourſelves! With what difficulty we are brought to confeſs our folly and our ſin! The Lord, however, ſent him forth to his work again, and commiſſioned him to anoint a king for Syria, a king for Iſrael, and a prophet to ſucceed himſelf. He encouraged him, alſo, with the aſſurance, that, whatever complaints he might urge againſt his countrymen, there were ſeven thouſand ſtill left in Iſrael, who had not conformed to the eſtabliſhed idolatry. Much inſtruction is hereby conveyed to us. Theſe are dark times; and, when we conſider the general prevalence of iniquity, and the frequent rejection of the faithful miniſters of Chriſt, perhaps we give way to deſponding thoughts. But we ought to believe

and

and rejoice, that there is a remnant among us, "according to the election of grace," which is, probably, far greater than we know or can conceive *. But, be the case as it may, it is our part to be active and unwearied in promoting the cause of God, and not to desert our post through timidity or a peevish disgust. Let each one put the question to himself, "What doest thou here?" Art thou in the place, and diligently employed in the work, appointed for thee? Return, ye backsliders, with shame and humiliation for your departure; return, with fresh zeal and vigour to prosecute the duties of your high calling.

Elijah obeyed the heavenly mandate, and executed the commission. Soon afterwards he anointed Elisha to the prophetic office, and found help and comfort in the services of that pious attendant. It is probable that they set themselves together to oppose the general corruptions, to instruct the people in true religion, and to prepare future ministers by superintending the schools of the prophets.

Years before Christ, 899. It appeared that Elijah had recovered all his former intrepidity, when he went, agreeably to the command of God and as His messenger, to reprove the king, and to denounce the divine vengeance against him, for his aggravated guilt in the murder of Naboth †. Intimidated by no fear of danger, he obtruded himself, as a most unwelcome visitant, upon the royal offender, at the very moment of his triumph, when he was taking possession of Naboth's vineyard: there he pronounced his doom, and predict-

* Rom. xi. 2—5. † 1 Kings, xxi. 17, &c.

ed the terrible deſtruction, which awaited both his impious queen and the whole of his poſterity. The language might ſeem harſh and inſolent; but, though not wanting in reſpect to his prince, he regarded a higher authority, and determined " to obey God rather than men."——The ſame firmneſs of mind ſhould all the miniſters of the Goſpel maintain. They are often obliged to carry an offenſive meſſage; for they muſt declare to every preſumptuous ſinner, without any diſtinction of rank, as Elijah to Ahab, " O wicked man, thou ſhalt ſurely die *." Diſcourage them not in the diſcharge of their office. Say not as the Jews of old, " Propheſy not unto us right things; ſpeak unto us ſmooth things; propheſy deceits †." Rather, pray for them, that the ſpirit of Elijah may reſt upon them, that they may " keep back nothing profitable" from their people, nor " ſhun to declare unto them all the counſel of God ‡."

Years before Chriſt, 896. On another awful occaſion, the prophet diſcovered the ſame boldneſs and fidelity in executing the divine commiſſion, even at the hazard of his life §. When Ahaziah, who then ruled over Iſrael, had diſpatched his ſervants to conſult an heathen oracle as to the event of his ſickneſs, Elijah met them with a very ſtriking reproof for their contempt of the God of Iſrael, and foretold the approaching death of their maſter. This offenſive declaration excited the rage of the king againſt him, who therefore ſent an armed company to apprehend him. The ſoldiers went, as they were ordered, and required the man of

* Ezek. xxxiii. 8. † Iſa. xxx. 10. ‡ Acts, xx. 20, 27.
§ 2 Kings, i. 2, &c.

God

God to ſurrender himſelf up to them: nor did he attempt to eſcape by flight. But it pleaſed Jehovah to take the matter into his own hand, to vindicate the cauſe of his deſpiſed and perſecuted miniſter, and to give one more ſignal teſtimony to that unbelieving nation, that He himſelf is God alone. Elijah, therefore, was moved by immediate inſpiration to call down fire from heaven, to conſume both the officer and his troop. The tremendous viſitation produced no good effect upon the tyrant: for he ſtill hardened his heart, and, as if he would maintain a conteſt with Jehovah, preſumptuouſly ſent another band of ſoldiers upon the ſame errand: and they alſo periſhed in the ſame awful manner. Was he not yet convinced of his impiety? So far from it, that he diſpatched a third company: but the leader of them, intimidated by the former judgments, ſued to the prophet for his life. Elijah, ſtill acting under the divine direction, inſtantly complied, went as required, and, with an undaunted courage, ſtood before the king: but even then he declared, as he had done before, the anger of the Lord againſt him, and the near approach of his diſſolution. How the enraged monarch was affected by the preſence, the intrepidity, and addreſs of this holy man we know not; but, probably, he was confounded, his fury turned into terror, and his purpoſe of violence utterly defeated.

May we not learn, then, to poſſeſs an unſhaken firmneſs of mind in the ſervice of our God? For what have we to fear in the path of duty? What, "though an hoſt ſhould encamp againſt us;" ſtill

" they that be with us, are more than they that be with them." The Lord Almighty can easily dismay the proudest of our opposers, and restrain their impotent malice. Let us go forth, therefore, in obedience to our exalted Leader, wherever he shall direct, nor decline any office to which He may appoint us. Depending upon him, we may defy the assaults of all our enemies, and triumph in the assurance of salvation. Shall we not say, then, with the Apostle, " None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy*?"

But let not the conduct of Elijah, in calling down fire on his adversaries, be mistaken or perverted. We cannot suppose that he acted under the influence of cowardice, pride, or revenge. God had determined to make his power known to these idolaters, and therefore instructed the prophet to pronounce, and, as it were, to execute the awful sentence of condemnation. The circumstances, doubtless, were extraordinary; and what was done upon an extraordinary occasion by One divinely commissioned, cannot properly be adduced as a precedent for us. Two of our Lord's disciples, who betrayed an angry vindictive temper, and wished to consume their opposers by fire, pleaded this instance, but met with a solemn reproof, as not knowing " what manner of spirit they were of†." The followers of the blessed Jesus should imitate their Master, and desire " not to destroy men's lives, but to save them." He has taught us not by precept only, but by his own illustrious example, to " love our enemies, and do good to them which hate us‡."

* Acts, xx. 24. † Luke ix. 54, 56. ‡ vi. 27.

The

The life of this eminent ſaint was in many reſpects ſingular and uncommon, and ſo was his end. "The Lord would take him up into heaven by a whirlwind *." The time and probably the mode of this intended tranſlation were revealed to him. Yet, though filled with holy meditations upon his approaching change, he remitted not his accuſtomed diligence, but ſpent his few remaining hours in an active diſcharge of his office. He continued to viſit the ſchools of the prophets, going about from one of theſe ſeminaries to another, teaching and encouraging the pious youths, who were educated in them. Eliſha, his attendant and ſucceſſor, accompanied him in his circuit, and, though entreated to leave him, perhaps that he might not be diſtreſſed by the ſudden ſeparation, enjoyed the benefits of his converſation and his prayers to the very laſt. When they came together to the river Jordan, Elijah, by the ſame miraculous power, that Moſes and Joſhua had exerciſed, with his mantle ſmote the waters, which inſtantly divided, and permitted them to paſs through on dry ground. He had juſt propoſed, as a token of his love, to uſe his influence for the accompliſhment of whatever Eliſha might requeſt; and then, as they were ſtill going forward, "a chariot of fire and horſes of fire appeared, and parted them both aſunder, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Like Enoch in the antediluvian world, "he was tranſlated that he ſhould not ſee death." This was, indeed, a ſingular honour, deſigned, doubtleſs, to teſtify the divine approbation of that good man, who had been generally

* 2 Kings, ii. 1, &c.

despised and insulted, and "of whom the world was not worthy." Hereby also, the Lord gave a strong confirmation of the doctrines Elijah had taught, a decided proof of a future state, and an encouragement to the few godly persons, who were left in the land, to persevere in righteousness, however persecuted for it*.

The ministry of Elijah does not appear to have produced any such remarkable change in the nation, as we might have expected. But none will doubt, that he possessed a high degree of holiness, or that he now fills a distinguished place in heaven. It may also happen among ourselves, that some of the most eminent servants of Christ may not be the most extensively useful in the Church. Acceptance with men, or success in our pious undertakings, should not be our main object. Let us approve ourselves to God, exert our talents vigorously, and leave the consequences to Him.

Are we desirous to follow Elijah to the bright regions above? We must "not be conformed to this world," nor any longer "halt between two opinions." We must resolutely devote ourselves to the Lord, seize and improve every opportunity of promoting his glory, and be constant unto death. Then, though our bodies

* A letter, containing a solemn reproof and prediction, is said to have been received by Jehoram, king of Judah, from the prophet Elijah, some years after the date to which his translation is generally referred; 2 Chron. xxi. 12—15. There are those, who suppose that letter to have been sent by Elisha, who was cotemporary with the king: and it might possibly be prepared beforehand, in the spirit of prophecy, by Elijah, and directed to be sent after he had quitted the earth, that it might have the greater effect.

must

muſt awhile ſleep in the duſt, our ſpirits ſhall be conveyed by the miniſtry of Angels into the manſions of the bleſſed.——It is your privilege, who ſerve the Lord Chriſt, to look forwards, with triumphant joy, to your approaching tranſlation. After a few more years, "the Lord himſelf ſhall deſcend from heaven," and ſhall "ranſom you from the power of the grave." Then, in a more honourable manner than Elijah, you "ſhall be caught up together in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and ſo ſhall you ever be with the Lord *."

Would to God, this were the happy proſpect of every reader! But may we not aſk, "Do not you reject the counſel of God againſt yourſelves?" He invites you to receive pardon, peace, and eternal life, in his Son Jeſus Chriſt. But do you not deſpiſe the gracious invitations? He will revenge the inſult, and you ſhall feel his anger. While "ſome ſhall awake to everlaſting life," you ſhall come forth "to ſhame and everlaſting contempt." Some perhaps, who worſhip in the ſame church, or dwell in the ſame family, ſhall be conveyed "into Abraham's boſom," and you be conducted by the executioners of divine vengeance into a place of endleſs torment and deſpair. O "flee from the wrath to come!"——We pray you, in Chriſt's ſtead, "Be ye reconciled to God."

* 1 Theſſ. iv. 16, 17.

E L I S H A.

CHAP. IX.

SECT. I.

Elisha, appointed to the prophetic office—attended Elijah, till his assumption into heaven—divided Jordan—healed the waters of Jericho—cursed the children at Bethel—accompanied the confederate armies against the Moabites—multiplied the widow's oil—entertained by the pious Shunamite—raised her son to life.

MINISTERS and prophets may be removed from the Church; but the great Head continues to be present with it. "They die and return to their dust;" but "He has the residue of the Spirit," and "is alive for evermore." This consideration should moderate our anxiety, and alleviate our grief, though one and another, "who seemed to be pillars," may be taken away. They derived all their excellency and all their usefulness from Jesus, who is "the same," in power and every other perfection, "yesterday, to day, and for ever," and who still exercises the same care over his people. May not He, therefore, raise up among ourselves as faithful servants, and as eminent instruments of his glory, as those were, whose departure may be now lamented? Let us pray, that He would pour out an abundant portion of that Spirit, by which

which they were rendered a blessing to the world, upon those, who are called to labour in the Gospel. "O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works, that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them: O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour *!"

We were ready to grieve for Elijah's removal from the earth: but the Lord had provided a suitable successor; for "the spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha." There was a remarkable likeness between the two prophets. Elisha bore a striking resemblance to his master, in his manner of life, his disposition, the faithful execution of his office, and the miraculous powers, which he possessed.

Years before Christ, 906.

He had an appointment to the charge, some years before he fully entered upon it †. As he was following the plough, he received a divine intimation of his being chosen out of all Israel to that high and spiritual employment. Elijah's mantle, suddenly cast upon him, was understood as the call of God, which was accompanied with such an energy as inclined him to accept it. Immediately, therefore, he left all his former connections and engagements, and became the constant attendant of Elijah, that he might profit by the example of that holy man, and thereby be gradually fitted for his work.

Do we ask the reason of this appointment? "The Lord seeth not as man seeth:" He pays no respect to outward grandeur, or eminence of rank; neither does He choose any because of their education or their natu-

* Litany, from Psalm xliv. 1, 26.

† 1 Kings xix. 19—21.

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ral abilities. But He gives his ſervants the proper qualifications and diſpoſitions for the place, in which He deſigns to fix them. We cannot but adore his ſecret and invincible influence upon the ſoul. When the Saviour ſaid to one and another, " Follow me," the deareſt friends and moſt lucrative occupations were cheerfully renounced, and the moſt arduous duties performed, from love to his name. May We feel the energy of his grace, " working in us mightily," and, by an immediate and unreſerved ſubmiſſion, may we " make our calling and election ſure!"

Years before Chriſt, 896. Long did he enjoy the inſtructive converſe of Elijah; and at that diſtreſſing ſeaſon, when his guide was about to be taken from him, he diſcovered the ſtrength of his attachment to him*. Determined to accompany him to the end, though entreated to deſiſt from his attendance, he ſolemnly declared again and again, " I will not leave thee."——With the ſame fervour and ſteadineſs of affection, may We cleave to and follow our exalted Leader! Are we devoted to his ſervice? Then let us reſolve, by his aſſiſtance, that nothing ſhall ſeparate us from Him.

We obſerve the diſintereſtedneſs and piety of Eliſha, when, at his maſter's deſire, he made his laſt requeſt, and aſked, not for worldly bleſſings, but for an abundant meaſure of divine grace. He ſaid, " Let a double portion of thy ſpirit be upon me." From a ſenſe of his own inability to ſtand in that moſt arduous ſituation, for which all the firmneſs of Elijah had ſcarcely been ſufficient, he prayed that he might be ſupported

* 2 Kings ii. 1, &c.

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from above, as that holy man had been, and be endued with the ſame prudence, zeal, and fidelity. He petitioned for "a double portion;" by which he might mean only a very large ſupply, or, probably, double of what the prophets uſually had. It is poſſible, indeed, while he felt his own unfitneſs for his work, he might conclude, that nothing ſhort of twice that aid, which was communicated to Elijah, would enable him to maintain his ground; and therefore, in the fervour of his deſires towards God, he might properly aſk it.

Do not we alſo fill an important ſtation? and are we not placed in perilous circumſtances? What, then, ſhall we wiſh for ſo much, as that wiſdom, ſtrength, and courage, which will be neceſſary for an honourable diſcharge of our truſt? We thank God, that the liberty of requeſting what we would have done for us, is likewiſe granted to us, by One greater than Elijah; by One who has in Himſelf all bleſſings to beſtow. We are not ſtraitened in Him: let us not be ſtraitened in ourſelves. Let us come with large petitions, and "covet earneſtly the beſt gifts." If, indeed, we are ſenſible of our own inability, we ſhall pray moſt importunately for ſpiritual gifts: nor ſhall we pray in vain: our very deſires to obtain grace are a certain token, that we ſhall not be diſappointed.

Eliſha obtained the ſuit. Of this he had been aſſured, while he was witneſs of his maſter's glorious aſſumption into heaven. Yet, lamenting his own and the public loſs, he rent his clothes, and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Iſrael, and the horſemen thereof:" as if he had ſaid, "Alas! what ſhall

ſhall Iſrael do, when its defence is taken away?"—— It is an awful providence, which removes the faithful miniſters of God. They are the bulwark of the land; for by their example, interceſſions, and admonitions, they contribute as much to its protection, as the chariots of war and the horſemen thereof. Then let us "lift up our prayer for the remnant that is left," that God may ſtrengthen them for their work, and render them an extenſive bleſſing in their generation. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" Is his hand ſhortened? or, are his mercies reſtrained?

Eliſha ſoon experienced the aſſiſtance of that Spirit, which he had deſired. He aſſumed the mantle, which his maſter had dropped; and, in order to prove his commiſſion, with this very mantle he ſmote the ſtreams of Jordan upon his return, and opened a miraculous paſſage through the river. The ſons of the prophets obſerved the tranſaction, and immediately, with much reverence, confeſſed the honour put upon him. Further evidence of his divine legation appeared in the works, both of mercy and of judgment, which God wrought by him. A ſurpriſing train of miracles followed, which will furniſh us with many important inſtructions.

At his word the waters of Jericho were healed, by no other operation than that of caſting ſalt into the ſpring. The method of cure was ſimple, and could not have ſucceeded, except it had been made effectual by the power of God. But the event ſhewed, that he ſpake and acted in faith, as the meſſenger of Heaven. Nor ought we to doubt of obtaining a happy iſſue in

any instance, where we have the direction and promise of the Lord. Then we may expect great things from the feeblest means.

In the neighbourhood of Bethel, the little children of the city came forth to mock him, insulted him for his age and infirmity, and bad him "Go up," with a reference, probably, to the late assumption of Elijah. Immediately, as if the wild beasts of the forest had been subject to his control, when he pronounced the curse, two bears rushed upon them, and destroyed forty-two of the company.——The mournful history may excite our wonder: but let God, and his prophet also, be justified. Surely, this solemn judgment will teach us to "stand in awe, and sin not." It is evident, that Elisha acted agreeably to a divine impulse upon his mind, or else the event would not have confirmed his imprecation; and accordingly, he is said to have done it "in the name of the Lord." The behaviour of these young persons was extremely profane; and therefore God determined to make them an example of his vengeance. He cannot bear that his people, and especially his ministers, should be despised and scoffed at; for He considers the contempt as put upon himself. Even little children should learn from this instance, that the God of heaven pays a regard to their words, and is provoked by the speeches, which they utter in derision of holy things or holy men: nor will their tender age, or the neglect of their education, secure them from his displeasure.

The parents, probably, were in this case more guilty than their offspring, as having taught them to

treat religion and religious characters with ſcorn. For THEIR* correction, therefore, the viſitation might be intended. They were puniſhed for their impiety, by the hand of God himſelf, in the deſolation of their families. This very circumſtance alſo, as being of public notoriety, was calculated to check the profligacy of the place and neighbourhood. It was one of the crying ſins of Iſrael, that "they mocked the meſſengers of God*." In this awful manner, then, He vindicated the authority of his prophet, and chaſtiſed their inſolent and perſecuting ſpirit.

What ſhall be ſaid to thoſe perſons among ourſelves, who train up their children in ignorance and contempt of God and his truth? We would beſpeak their attention. O conſider, what complicated guilt you incur, and what various diſtreſſes you are likely to bring both upon yourſelves and them! For what can you expect to be the iſſue of ſuch a courſe? Will not God interpoſe, and make himſelf known by the judgments, which he executeth? Or will it be at all ſtrange, if you ſhould be witneſſes to the untimely end of thoſe, whom you love? They may periſh juſtly in their iniquity; but will there not be an inſupportable burden upon your conſciences, if they have learned from you to neglect and deſpiſe the ſervice of their Creator? O be concerned for their eternal welfare, before it be too late!

From Bethel the prophet retired to Carmel, where, probably, he might enjoy more opportunities of private

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16.

devotion.

devotion. But he was ſoon called forth to public notice. He attended the united armies of Iſrael, Edom, and Judah, perhaps by the divine direction, in an expedition againſt the Moabites, which gave him an occaſion of diſplaying the glory of God*. Theſe numerous hoſts were reduced to a very great ſtrait from the want of water; and in their perplexity the three aſſociated kings applied for help to Eliſha. The man of God, however, "knew not to give flattering titles," but with authority, and with much ſeeming ſeverity, he reproved Jehoram, the wicked king of Iſrael, for his deteſtable hypocriſy, and for his attachment to the idolatries of his father's houſe. This language, indeed, may appear inconſiſtent with the obedience and reſpect, which he owed as a ſubject. But he acted by a ſingular commiſſion, and probably according to expreſs inſtructions. His conduct, therefore, under ſuch circumſtances, can be no precedent for us. We are not to court the favour of the great any more than Eliſha, or to "have men's perſons in admiration becauſe of advantage." But, while we abhor their ſins, and with all prudence as well as fidelity bear our teſtimony againſt them, if our place require it, ſtill it ſhould be our invariable rule, to "render honour to whom honour is due."

To the pious prince Jehoſhaphat, Eliſha paid regard, and for his ſake enquired of the Lord. When his ſpirit was compoſed by means of ſacred muſic, he received the gracious communications of Heaven, and

* 2 Kings iii. 6, &c.

under

under the divine inſpiration foretold a miraculous deliverance from the drought, and a deciſive victory over the Moabites. Both theſe were obtained in anſwer to his prayer, and muſt have been conſidered, not only as an honour put upon Him, but, in an eſpecial manner, as an encouragement to truſt the Lord, and a public atteſtation of the true religion.——It is a peculiar bleſſing, to be favoured with the ſociety of thoſe, who have power with God, and can prevail by their charitable interceſſions. Probably, the world of ungodly ſinners may enjoy many advantages, for the ſake of the few excellent perſons, whoſe characters may not be much known or valued amongſt them. Our own kingdom may be upheld and may proſper, in conſequence of their ardent ſupplications, who are dear to God. May we learn to place our higheſt regard upon ſuch as are moſt precious in His account!

Eliſha ſeems not to have been brought into notice and eſteem at court, as we might have ſuppoſed from the late miraculous deliverance, obtained by his interpoſition. But, though he continued a poor man generally neglected, he diſpenſed bleſſings from heaven, wherever he went. He felt compaſſion for the diſtreſſed, and, like our Lord, wrought many wonderful works, not to advance his own reputation, but to ſhew forth the glory of the Lord God of Iſrael, and to confer happineſs on others.

Upon the application of a ſorrowful widow, he multiplied her oil in ſo large a meaſure, that by the profits of it her debts were honourably diſcharged, her ſons reſcued

rescued from bondage, and the whole family supported*. We possess not the supernatural powers of Elisha; but we owe the same attention to the afflicted, and by our well directed liberality we also may "cause the widow's heart to sing for joy†."

In one of his circuits through the land, he met with a very hospitable reception from a pious woman of considerable rank at Shunem, who accommodated him with a retired room for his own peculiar use. The prophet from a sense of gratitude, desirous to requite her kindness, offered to exert his influence for her in any way she wished. But her modesty and contentment would not permit her to make any request: she was satisfied with her station. However, at the prayer of Elisha, a child was granted her, and thereby, as it should seem, her only grievance was removed. God is often pleased to give a present recompence to those, who favour and assist his servants, for His sake. For thus He has assured us, "He that receiveth a righteous man, in the name of a righteous man, shall receive a righteous man's reward‡."

But even our blessings expose us to many trials. At the very time, when the mother, probably, flattered herself with the expectation of much comfort from her son, he died. Yet the event was so ordered, as to afford a stronger testimony of Elisha's commission, and of her unfeigned reliance upon God. With anguish of spirit, but with a surprising confidence of obtaining deliverance, she instantly applied to Elisha, and thus

* 2 Kings iv. 1, &c † Job xxix. 13. ‡ Matt. x. 41.

proved herſelf in the number of thoſe women, who by faith "received their dead raiſed to life again*." In the midſt of her diſtreſs ſhe poſſeſſed an uncommon firmneſs and compoſure of mind; and therefore to the prophet's enquiry, reſpecting the ſtate of her family, ſhe could reply, "It is well." How eminent a pattern of truſt in God, and reſignation to His will! How few are willing to allow, that "It is well," when He blaſts their ſchemes of happineſs, and "takes away from them the deſire of their eyes with a ſtroke!"

Eliſha firſt diſpatched his ſervant in great haſte, for the recovery of the child. But that expedient failed, perhaps for their further trial. At length, however, he himſelf arrived; yet even then, he felt his own inability to effect the change he wiſhed. But he cried unto God in faith; and, through his repeated and very ardent ſupplications, the beloved ſon was reſtored alive to his mother. In our deepeſt afflictions, the Lord will be to us a "God of hope." Though we look not for the preſent reſurrection of the dear friends who are removed, there are ſtill many other ways, in which He can wipe the tears from our eyes, and "turn for us our mourning into dancing." Eliſha's example teaches us to "weep with them that weep," and to bear upon our hearts before God the different caſes of them that mourn. The miniſters of Chriſt, in an eſpecial manner, ſhould learn from him to pay the tendereſt regard to ſuch as are oppreſſed with ſorrow or temptation, to liſten to all their complaints and lamen-

* Heb. xi. 35.

tations,

tations, and to make earneſt interceſſion for them to "the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort." O that this meek, diſintereſted, and benevolent diſpoſion were more clearly evidenced by all the diſciples of our compaſſionate Redeemer! Like Him, we ſhould ſympathize with the diſtreſſed, and rejoice to extend relief and conſolation to them, though with much expence and difficulty to ourſelves. Jeſus hath "left us the example, that we ſhould follow his ſteps."

ELISHA.

SECT. 2.

Elisha visited and relieved the sons of the prophets—his conduct to Naaman—and to Gehazi—caused iron to swim—disclosed the king of Syria's counsels—his behaviour toward the Syrian army—foretold a speedy deliverance from famine—recompensed the Shunamite—went to Damascus, and was there consulted by the king—warned Hazael—sent to anoint Jehu—attended on his dying bed by king Joash—a dead body revived by his bones.

THE man of God, whose character we are contemplating, has already appeared in an amiable light, and exhibited a pattern of ministerial fidelity, meekness, and love. Concerned for the honour of his God, he laboured to promote a revival of true religion, and sought not his own advancement in the world. The hand of the Lord was with him, even so as to overrule, in various instances, the ordinary course of nature: and yet it should seem, that "a disobedient and gainsaying people" despised his instructions. This would astonish us the more, if we did not recollect a stronger proof of the obduracy of the human heart: the Son of God himself, who wrought so many wonderful works of mercy, met with almost universal con-

tempt

tempt and infamy. Let not the servant complain, that he receives no better treatment than his Master, but patiently persevere in well-doing to the end.

Elisha discovered a peculiar condescension and benevolence in his attention to cases of private distress. While he visited the schools of the prophets, doubtless with a view to the spiritual improvement of the pious youths, he was not regardless of their temporal necessities *. He saw them oppressed with famine, but instantly relieved them by his fatherly care. His miraculous powers were exerted at one time to prevent their being poisoned by noxious herbs, at another to feed a hundred of them by multiplying the very food, which had been provided for himself, and which he generously gave up for their sustenance. We likewise are required "to be ready to every good work," and to "look, not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others †."

Years before Christ, 894. The fame of Elisha reached to some neighbouring countries, and by his means the perfections of the true God were manifested to heathens. Naaman, a celebrated General among the Syrians, being afflicted with a grievous leprosy, was induced by the representation of a little captive maid to solicit the assistance of Elisha for the removal of his disease ‡. The application was first made to the king of Israel, as if He must have been best acquainted with the prophet, or could have commanded his services. But he seemed not to have known, or to have

* 2 Kings iv. 38, &c. † Tit. iii. 1. Phil. ii. 4.
‡ 2 Kings v. 1, &c.

forgotten, that he had ſo eminent a perſon in his dominions. Eliſha, however, interpoſed for the honour of the God of Iſrael, and deſired the attendance of this Syrian captain.

Naaman, therefore, with much pomp and a large retinue, waited at the prophet's door, and there received a meſſage, that upon waſhing ſeven times in Jordan he ſhould be perfectly whole. But he went away in a rage: for he thought himſelf treated unſuitably to his high dignity, and deſpiſed the means preſcribed, as utterly inadequate to the end propoſed. And how ſhall we juſtify the behaviour of Eliſha, which has, we allow, the appearance of rudeneſs and arrogance? The circumſtances of the caſe ſhould be conſidered; and then we ſhall ſee a propriety in that, which otherwiſe we might condemn. The Syrian, evidently full of his own importance, had probably conceived an idea, that the man of God would be honoured by ſuch a viſitant, and would pay court to him for his rank and magnificence. It was therefore deſigned to humble his pride, and to impreſs his mind with a reverence for the God of Iſrael, by ſhewing him, that the prophet of Heaven regarded not theſe outward diſtinctions, and ſought no favour from him. Doubtleſs, it becomes the miniſters of Chriſt to be meek, and gentle, and eaſy of acceſs to all: but there are occaſions, when it is neceſſary for them alſo to "magnify their office." They diſgrace their ſacred character, when they fawn upon the great, and, by their flattering attentions to them, cheriſh that haughtineſs of temper, which they ſhould aim to ſubdue.

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The very ſimple method, appointed for the cure, was likewiſe intended as a trial to Naaman. It accorded not with the concluſions of human wiſdom; but, in the view of reaſon, it might be deemed fooliſh and contemptible. On that very account, probably, it was fixed upon, to diſplay the ſovereign power of Jehovah. This is His moſt uſual way of procedure. " The weakneſs of God is ſtronger than men." In the diſpenſation of the Goſpel it is His plan, throughout, to confer all ſpiritual bleſſings by thoſe means, which are mortifying to our pride, as requiring a ſubmiſſion both of the underſtanding and of the will to God, that He alone may be glorified. Hence it is, that many quarrel with them, and will not prove their efficacy. For the remedy, which the Goſpel preſcribes to ſinners for their loathſome malady, is exactly ſimilar to this, which the Syrian diſdained,——" Waſh and be clean."

At length, however, the haughty ſoldier, when his attendants had remonſtrated with him, complied with the direction, and inſtantly experienced in himſelf the promiſed cure. The Lord will have us to come down to His terms; nor will he beſtow his ſalvation upon us, till we unfeignedly ſubmit to his appointment.

Naaman returned full of gratitude, and, after making a noble confeſſion of his faith in the God of Iſrael, as the only true God, he earneſtly entreated Eliſha to accept a preſent. But here again we admire the diſintereſted conduct of the man of God, and his generous concern for the honour of religion. Far from being in affluent circumſtances, on ſome occaſions he

very readily received, and ſubſiſted on, the bounty of others. But apprehending, probably, that the hopeful convictions, which Naaman diſcovered, might be checked by any appearance of ſelfiſhneſs in him, he peremptorily rejected the offer, and muſt thereby have impreſſed the Syrian's mind, more ſtrongly, with a perſuaſion of the reality and excellence of his piety. ——It is not wrong, "that thoſe, who preach the Goſpel, ſhould live of the Goſpel *:" but it is of great importance for them to prove, that they can deſpiſe their own advantages, in order to glorify God, and promote the grand object of their miniſtry. In ſome caſes, it would be a mark of pride in them to refuſe a gift; but they will labour to poor purpoſe, and both their principles and their profeſſion will be held in utter contempt, if their aim be to enrich themſelves, or even if they be ſuſpected of making a gain of godlineſs. "They, that will be rich, fall into temptation, and a ſnare, and into many fooliſh and hurtful luſts, which drown men in deſtruction and perdition †."

This awful declaration was verified in Gehazi, the ſervant of Eliſha. He coveted the treaſures, which his maſter had declined; and, following Naaman with a falſehood in his mouth, he contrived to obtain a large ſum for himſelf. The fraud was not long concealed. Eliſha detected it, and expreſſed his abhorrence of it, while in God's name he pronounced the ſentence, that both he and his poſterity ſhould inherit the leproſy of Naaman. The ſin was indeed of a moſt malignant

* 1 Cor. ix. 14. † 1 Tim. vi. 9.

nature, as it tended to difgrace the prophet, and bring religion into reproach; and therefore the punifhment was appointed to be a ftanding memorial of the bafenefs of his offence. O let us fear the love of money, which is "the root of all evil!" Are we furprifed to find fuch complicated villany even in Elifha's family? Alas! no place, no fociety, no inftructions, or example, how excellent foever, will be an infallible fecurity to us. Our Lord himfelf had a Judas, in the fmall company of his Apoftles.

Is it enquired, "Why was the cure vouchfafed to Naaman?" Let our Saviour anfwer: He has obferved, on this very cafe, that God difpenfes his favours in a fovereign manner, as he pleafes: for there were many lepers in Ifrael at that very time, who were all paffed by, while an idolatrous Syrian was healed *.

Elifha continued to be a bleffing to his country both in public and private. Whilft the fons of the prophets were enlarging the place of their refidence, he attended, for their encouragement and affiftance, and wrought a miracle to relieve one of them from diftrefs, by caufing iron to fwim on the furface of the water †.——In vain the king of Syria prepared his ambufcades againft the Ifraelites, whilft Elifha difclofed his counfels, which were evidently communicated to him for the very purpofe by divine revelation. This, indeed, expofed his life to the moft imminent danger; for an armed hoft of the Syrians came to apprehend him. But even then, though he had no vifible defence, he poffeffed an aftonifhing confidence and compofure.

* Luke, iv. 27. † 2 Kings, vi. 1.

His

His ſervant, terrified by the multitudes of ſurrounding enemies, cried out, " Alas! my maſter, how ſhall we do?" The prophet, looking up to God in faith, replied, " Fear not; for they, that be with us, are more than they that be with them:" and, upon his prayer, the young man's eyes were opened to behold an immenſe company of angels, like " horſes and chariots of fire, round about Eliſha."——They enjoy an invincible protection, who are taken under the care and keeping of an Almighty God; and therefore they may adopt that triumphant ſong, " I will not be afraid of ten thouſands of people, that have ſet themſelves againſt me round about*." Like Eliſha's trembling attendant, we are often diſmayed at the firſt appearance of danger, forgetting that " The Lord is our defence." But as far as we lean upon the arm of the mighty God of Jacob, we may apply to ourſelves the declaration of Eliſha, and diſperſe our fears under this aſſurance, " They, that be with us, are more than they that be with them."

Little do the enemies of God conſider, what folly as well as wickedneſs they are guilty of, in oppoſing His work and His people. Their counſels are vain, and muſt turn to their own confuſion.——At the prophet's word, the Syrian hoſt was ſmitten with blindneſs, till he himſelf, like a conqueror, had led them into the midſt of Samaria, and delivered them up to the king of Iſrael. Then the very men, who had come to take his life, trembled for their own. Jehoram immediately propoſed to put them to death, as his lawful prey; and

* Pſal. iii 6.

they

they were ſpared only by the interceſſion of Eliſha, whom they themſelves had intended to deſtroy. By his deſire, they were ſupplied with próviſions, and then diſmiſſed in peace.——What an example of forbearance and kindneſs towards injurious perſecutors is here ſet before us! Let us not ſuppoſe, that ancient ſaints alone were required to exerciſe this diſpoſition, or that we are at liberty, in any caſe, to gratify our reſentment. To us alſo the precept is given, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourſelves:——but, if thine enemy hunger, feed him*." How oppoſite is this to the dictates of a depraved nature, which can never reliſh the idea of returning good for evil! O let us watch and pray againſt the pride and bitterneſs of our hearts! For into what enormities would they not lead us?

Another danger threatened the life of Eliſha. The inhabitants of Samaria, while cloſely beſieged by the Syrians, were periſhing by famine. The king himſelf felt the weight of the calamity; but, inſtead of being humbled before God and renouncing his iniquities, he was filled with rage againſt Eliſha, who, probably, had foretold and denounced this judgment as a puniſhment for his wickedneſs. He determined, therefore, to rid himſelf of this troubleſome man, and ſent an executioner to deſtroy him. What folly, what madneſs was this! For what had Eliſha done? Alas! ſinners, even under affliction, are more ready to quarrel with every thing around them, than with their own evil practices, which have brought their ſufferings upon them. But, while Jehoram, with his vile tempers, re-

* Rom. xii. 19, 20.

ſembled

sembled "the troubled sea, which cannot rest," Elisha, though aware of his danger, and in expectation of the murderer, sat still in his house, and with a sweet serenity of mind counselled the elders of the city.——Faith in God will inspire the strongest confidence, and enable us to maintain an undisturbed tranquillity, in the face of an enraged enemy. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee; because he trusteth in thee *."

The king was fired with indignation both against God and the prophet; but Elisha pacified his resentment by declaring, in the name of the Lord, that the very next day would terminate the calamity, and produce an astonishing plenty †. One of the attendant courtiers, indeed, turned the assertion into ridicule; but he received an awful punishment for his incredulity and contempt of the man of God. According to Elisha's word, he saw the promised plenty, and yet perished in the midst of it. How provoking to God is our unbelief! He will surely perform, what He has said: and therefore He considers himself as insulted by us, when we limit his power or his grace, and ask, "Can he bestow such a favour? Can He work so great a deliverance?"

The kindness of the pious Shunamite to Elisha met with a fresh recompence. By his counsel she escaped the distresses of the national famine; and for his sake she recovered her former possessions, of which she had been unjustly deprived ‡. Those good offices, which are undertaken for God or His people, will not be lost;

* Isa. xxvi. 3. † 2 Kings, vii. 1, &c. ‡ viii. 1, &c.

for

for "a book of remembrance is written before the Lord," in which a cup of cold water, given to a disciple, will not be unnoticed.

Years before Christ, 885. The labours of Elisha were not entirely confined to the land of Israel; at least for some special purpose he travelled to Damascus.—— But how dared he to venture himself among the Syrians, who had sought his life? He went, doubtless, by the divine direction, and therefore had nothing to fear. The Lord can at all times protect his servants, and "make even their enemies to be at peace with them." The king himself, who had before sent an army to apprehend him, treated him with peculiar respect, and requested him to enquire of the Lord concerning the event of that disease, which then oppressed him. What an honour was put upon the man of God! It had been well for Benhadad, had he consulted him in his health, or even in his sickness, with real contrition. But many obstinate offenders, when the terrors of death are upon them, will seek to the people and the ministers of God, whom they had once despised. It is pleasing to observe this at any time; for it is such a confession, as greatly redounds to the credit of religion.

We cannot but remark Elisha's very singular behaviour to Hazael, the king's officer. He told him, that his master might recover, as his disorder was not fatal, but that he would surely be taken off by some other means. He then burst into tears at the prospect of those miseries, which the very man before him was about to bring upon Israel, and warned him of the wanton cruelty, which he was about to exercise. Hazael expressed a perfect astonishment, believing himself incapable of so

vile

vile a conduct, and exclaimed, "But what? Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" Yet immediately upon his departure, he began to fulfil the prediction. What an instance is this of the deceitfulness of the human heart! Sinners, in general, would be overwhelmed with horror, if all the crimes, which they will certainly commit, were previously represented to them. Let us suspect ourselves, and implore the divine assistance. "He, that trusteth in his own heart, is a fool *."

God had determined to remove Jehoram from the throne of Israel, and to transfer the power to Jehu. This intention was revealed to Elisha, and by him, through another person who could do it with less danger, to Jehu himself †.——For a considerable period after that event, the sacred history makes no mention of our prophet. Perhaps he was utterly disregarded by Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Joash, who reigned in succession; but we conceive, that he was usefully employed and much honoured of God, though in a state of obscurity. The faithful minister of religion will not court the favour of the great, or mourn the loss of it, on his own account. But wherever he is, he will be improving his talents for the good of the Church, which cannot fail to reap very extensive advantages from his labours.

Years before Christ, about 839. At length the closing scene arrived.— Above sixty years from the time of his appointment, he had continued to discharge his office with zeal and fidelity. Nor was his dying bed inglo-

* Prov. xxviii. 26. † 2 Kings, ix. 1, &c.

rious;

rious; though he did not quit the world in the ſame triumphant manner as Elijah*. Joaſh, the king of Iſrael, ſtood among his weeping attendants. Probably aſhamed of his former neglect of him, he then with tears acknowledged the value of this eminent preacher of righteouſneſs, as the beſt protection of the ſtate.—— This is not an uncommon caſe. Many very profligate perſons will pay a peculiar reſpect to the faithful ſervants of God, who are about to be taken away, and bear witneſs to their worth and excellence, though they had ever before treated them with contempt.

Joaſh received a recompence for the regard he ſhewed to the good man in his laſt moments. For Eliſha, on whom the ſpirit of prophecy ſtill reſted, aſſured him by ſome ſignificant actions, that he ſhould be the inſtrument of delivering Iſrael from the oppreſſion of the Syrians.—It cannot but be profitable to viſit the beds of departing ſaints. We have great cauſe to lament their removal; but, while we expreſs our affection for them, we may carry away a bleſſing for ourſelves.

A ſingular honour was conferred upon Eliſha, even after his diſſolution: a dead body caſt into his ſepulchre, upon touching his bones, in a miraculous manner revived. This might be deſigned to recal the attention of the people to the character and inſtructions of the deceaſed prophet.——But we look to One, infinitely ſuperior to Eliſha, "who was dead and is alive," and who "through death has deſtroyed him that had the power of death," and given us the hopes of a glorious reſurrection to life eternal.

* 2 Kings, xiii. 14, &c.

The

The piety and zeal of Eliſha are perhaps generally applauded among ourſelves; and applauded, too, by thoſe very perſons, who diſlike and reproach every thing that bears the leaſt reſemblance to his example. We can aſſign the reaſon: you are not diſturbed by the holineſs and the labours of thoſe ſaints, who are now removed from the earth. But the preſence, the conduct, and admonitions of ſuch, as in any meaſure tread in their ſteps, are a conſtant reproof to you; and therefore they excite your enmity and oppoſition. In your own juſtification, you cry out againſt their fervour in religion as extravagance and enthuſiaſm. How then, would you have endured the far greater ſanctity, which appeared in ſome of theſe very eminent inſtances before us? Or, how can you expect to join their ſociety in the world above? We are haſtening to the end of all things. Leaving others, therefore, let us aſk, What is our own character? Among whom ſhall we be numbered? A ſeparation muſt ſhortly take place: Will it be for our honour, or our comfort? Surely, we ſhould be ſerious in this enquiry, and give diligence, that we may be accepted of the Lord, and, together with all his ranſomed people, be admitted into the kingdom of his glory.

JONAH.

CHAP. X.

Jonah, author of his own hiſtory—a prophet in Iſrael—ſent to Nineveh—refuſed to go, and ſailed for Tarſhiſh—overtaken by a ſtorm—caſt into the ſea—ſwallowed by a fiſh—cried to God—delivered—went and preached to the Ninevites—repined at the divine mercy to them—grieved immoderately for his gourd—reproved by God.

IT has often been urged as a ſtrong proof of the integrity of the ſacred writers, and conſequently of the truth of their narrations, that they took no pains to conceal or palliate their own failings, but openly declared them, with all the circumſtances of aggravation attending them. They were ſolicitous, not to ſet off themſelves as the objects of admiration, but to juſtify God in his proceedings, whatever might be thought of their characters. This remark muſt occur to us in the preſent hiſtory.

Jonah, probably, was the author of that little book, which bears his name, and which relates ſome ſurpriſing incidents in his life. From this account he appears in a very unfavourable light; and, though it is generally allowed that he was an upright man, he exhibits a ſtriking inſtance of human depravity, of the defects and perverſeneſs, which may remain even in the regenerate. But, inſtead of ſitting in judgment upon him,

let us examine, whether we are not in danger of dishonouring and provoking God, as he did. We must censure what was clearly criminal in him: yet may we not see greater reason to condemn ourselves? May we be convicted and humbled for our own guilt, and enabled to walk more suitably to our holy profession, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

Years before Christ, about 802. Jonah lived and prophesied in the kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam the second, not long after Elisha *. Probably, he delivered many predictions to his own countrymen, with which we are not acquainted. The circumstances, recorded concerning him, relate to a particular commission, which was given him, to preach at a distance from Judea. The Lord sent him to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, a very large and abandoned city, to denounce the divine wrath against the inhabitants for their iniquities †. The call was clear and express, so as to preclude all doubt about his duty. Yet he refused to comply with it, and, that he might hear no more of such troublesome revelations, he left his former abode, and "fled from the presence of the Lord."

What? Could he be ignorant, that God "filleth heaven and earth," and that no place can hide us from Him? He might, indeed, suppose, that the Spirit of prophecy was confined to Judea, and that in a remote country he should have no visions of the sort. But, whatever might be his sentiment, his conduct was ab-

* 2 Kings, xiv. 25. † Jon. i. 1, &c.

ſurd and wicked. It is an awful ſign, when "the preſence of God" becomes irkſome to us, and we wiſh to avoid all intercourſe with Him. This was the caſe with Adam immediately after the fall: nor is it different with ourſelves, whenever we deſire to act contrary to the command of God. For then we no longer love to be, where we have been accuſtomed to meet Him. His houſe and ordinances, the word and the throne of grace, are painful to us, and cover us with confuſion. Is not this an evident proof of a ſad declenſion?

But why was Jonah unwilling to execute his commiſſion? Not through ſuch an humble ſenſe of unworthineſs and inability, as Moſes and Jeremiah felt; but, we apprehend, through a diſtruſt of God, and a dread of the conſequences. For what could he look for at Nineveh, but cruel mockings, impriſonment, or death itſelf?—Thus many are unfaithful to their convictions, and diſobedient to the heavenly call, "leſt they ſhould ſuffer perſecution." Ah! how light do you ſet by the authority of God, if you refuſe to fulfil your bounden duty, becauſe it may ſubject you to inconvenience and dangers!

Jonah concluded from the divine forbearance, that the threatened ruin of the city would be averted or delayed, and therefore that he himſelf ſhould be accounted a falſe prophet*. It was no wonder, then, that he deſerted his poſt, while he regarded his own credit and ſafety more than the honour of God, or the deliverance of the people. How different was the ſpirit of the Apoſtles, who, at the hazard and expence of every

* Jonah iv. 2.

thing dear to them in this world, went forth to preach a despised Gospel, and "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus*!" How opposite was the conduct of Saint Paul, who could say, in the prospect of the severest afflictions, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God†!" Let the "stewards of the mysteries of God" remember, what simplicity, courage, disinterestedness and fidelity become their character, and let them not "seek their own, but the things which are Jesus Christ's."

The Lord perceives many perverse tempers in his children, and, like a wise as well as tender father, will not indulge them, but adopts the most suitable means for their correction and amendment. He contrived, therefore, by a tremendous judgment, to awaken the senseless prophet, and recover him to his duty. Whilst Jonah was sailing for Tarshish, amidst a company of idolatrous seamen, the Lord stirred up a violent tempest, so that they were all filled with consternation, in the expectation of immediate destruction. All but Jonah: he had fallen into a profound sleep (strange as it may seem, that his conscience would suffer him to rest,) but at length the ship-master, who was probably a stranger to the true God, roused him to prayer. What an alarm and a reproof must he have felt from

* Acts v. 41. † xx. 24.

those

those very striking words, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not." May the backslider, who is sunk into a state of spiritual stupor, attend to this address, and shake off "the spirit of slumber." For, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" How can'st thou remain insensible to thy danger? "Arise, and call upon thy God."

The sailors concluded from this uncommon storm, that the divine vengeance pursued some one among them for atrocious wickedness, and they expected to discover the guilty person by casting lots. Though they might act superstitiously, the providence of God over-ruled the whole transaction; and the lot fell upon Jonah. The offender was immediately detected, and obliged to confess his iniquity, which he thought to have concealed. What anguish must have oppressed his mind, when he found himself overtaken by the wrath of Heaven! Constrained, probably, by a supernatural impulse, he pronounced his own doom, and directed the mariners to throw him overboard, to appease the raging of the sea. They were unwilling to execute the sentence: but, till this was done, in vain they tried to gain the land. The Lord demanded the criminal; and only upon his being given up to the waves did the tempest subside. The prophet, then, went down into the deep; yet he perished not; for God had prepared a large fish to swallow him up alive, which secured him in its belly for three days and nights.

This doubtlefs, in a wonderful manner, difplays the power and uncontrolable fovereignty of God over all creatures. We attempt not to account for the ftrange event, which was confeffedly out of the common order of things; nor do we attend to any curious enquiries about it: but we acknowledge and adore the hand of God in it, for the correction and recovery of his difobedient fervant. Very myfterious are the ways, which he frequently ufes for the reftoring of his backfliding children; yet in general, we obferve, they are reduced by fome painful difpenfations. Perhaps nothing lefs would fubdue their rebellious fpirit. He follows them in mercy, as He did Jonah, and confounds their perverfe purpofes, that at length they may be willing to fubmit. O liften to his voice in the vifitation of his providence: for He fays, "Return unto me, and I will return unto you*!"

We fhould not have expected to hear any more of Jonah: but, though "caft down, he was not deftroyed." Out of the belly of the fifh he cried to the God of all grace, with deep humiliation for his fin, and with a believing hope of deliverance†. The prayer of faith prevailed, and, at the Lord's command, he came forth from his prifon.——Never was the fuit of a returning finner rejected. O be encouraged to lift up your fupplication, low as you may have fallen, and complicated as your miferies may be! "Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou haft tranfgreffed againft the Lord thy God ‡." He, who heard and par-

* Mal. iii. 7. † Jonah ii. 1, &c. ‡ Jer. iii. 13.

doned

doned Jonah, will not caſt out your prayer: He, who raiſed him from the bottom of the ſea, will not turn his mercy from you.

After this ſevere affliction, the prophet was again put upon his trial, by a renewal of the divine commiſſion, that he ſhould go and preach at Nineveh: and, having "learned obedience by the things which he ſuffered," he did not then decline the taſk*. He went agreeably to his injunctions, and declared the impending deſolation of that immenſe city.—It is well, if by any means our averſion to duty be overcome. Have our diſappointments and croſſes produced this ſalutary effect? Can we ſay, "Before I was afflicted, I went aſtray: but now have I kept thy word†?" We hear no more of Jonah's reluctance: but are WE willing to do the things commanded us, whatever they may coſt us?

And what reception did the awful meſſage meet with at Nineveh? A general alarm took place among the inhabitants from the greateſt to the leaſt. They believed the report; they faſted, repented, and obtained mercy. They exhibit, therefore, both a pattern and an encouragement to thoſe, againſt whom the terrors of the Lord are denounced. Will you credit the divine threatenings, and cry earneſtly, with a contrite heart, that your ſentence may be reverſed? Your application ſhall be regarded; for "the Lord waits to be gracious." But beware, leſt the example before you ſhould be a witneſs againſt you. It is a painful

* Jonah iii. 1, &c. † Pſal. cxix. 67.

reflection, that the ministers of Christ are not attended to, as Jonah was. "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and behold a greater than Jonas is here*." The Ninevites, probably, listened to the prophet the more readily, on account of his very singular case: for he was "a sign" unto them. But is not the case of that exalted prophet, "who is risen up among us," still more astonishing? The death and resurrection of "the Son of man" are shadowed forth in the history of Jonah, and are a more convincing sign to us. He, who "descended into the lower parts of the earth," and "rose again the third day according to the scriptures," calls us to turn from our evil ways. If we refuse to hear his voice, we shall be left without excuse.

Who, then, hath believed the report of the Gospel? Who hath been humbled under the mighty hand of God? Are not those, who were filthy, filthy still? Do not many harden themselves in their iniquities, and presume that no punishment shall follow? Ah! Sirs, this impenitence and obduracy mark you out for destruction. Did you, indeed, bow before God with sincere contrition, you also might escape the threatened vengeance, as the Ninevites did. But if you despise the warning, you shall "have judgment without mercy." Though you are not favoured with the personal ministry of Christ or his Apostles, the same truths, which they inculcated, are declared unto you; and if you

* Matt. xii. 41.

reject

reject his gracious offers, tendered to you even by the meanest of his servants, you will be as inexcusable, as if you had lived in the days of our Lord himself. O that you were wise, and knew the time of your visitation!

The perverseness of Jonah was not yet totally overcome. We might have expected, that he would have rejoiced in the penitence and deliverance of the Ninevites. But "it displeased him exceedingly, and he was very angry*." He complained that the divine forbearance had falsified his predictions, and made him appear in the light of an impostor; and therefore he wished to be removed from the earth. This betrayed a strange peevishness of spirit, and a very improper regard to himself, as if his own credit were of more consequence than the salvation of all the Ninevites. His former chastisement seemed to be forgotten; since he recurred to the very same temper, which he had before discovered.

It is easy to censure Jonah; but is not his case our own? The application to ourselves may be unpleasant and offensive; but it is highly necessary. Alas! how ineffectual are all outward means, to eradicate the depravity of our nature! Though subdued for a season, it will break forth again and again. In some favoured hours we may rashly conclude, that our inward foes are destroyed, and that we shall no more be in danger from the same quarter. But our triumph may be short. Fresh temptations may draw forth our old corruptions, perhaps with greater vigour, especially if we are care-

* Jon. iv. 1, &c.

less and confident. O what continual need we have to "walk humbly with God," to suspect and fear ourselves, and to rely upon the grace of Jesus for the complete and final victory!

The petulance of Jonah was highly sinful; and the Lord manifested his displeasure against him, yet with such tenderness and condescension as may justly surprise us. He called him to account, and vouchsafed to argue with him, "Doest thou well to be angry?"—— The prophet had retired from the city, and waited at some little distance from it, as if with an eager desire to see it consumed. In that unpleasant situation it afforded him some comfort, that he was sheltered from the heat by a gourd, which the Lord had suddenly prepared for him. But while he rejoiced in his gourd, it was as suddenly removed, and he was left to faint under the scorching beams of the sun. The peevish man grieved immoderately for his loss, and in a fretful spirit, as before, wished that he might die. It appears wonderful, that God still bore with his folly and perverseness, and did not cut him off in righteous indignation. Upon the question being repeated, "Doest thou well to be angry?" Jonah persisted in his impatience, "I do well to be angry even unto death." It was a presumptuous expression; yet the Lord continued to deal tenderly with him, aiming only to correct his evil tempers. He reproved him for discovering such a fond attachment to the poor, senseless, perishable plant, and for complaining of the divine conduct in sparing the Ninevites; since they were extremely numerous, and their lives of immense importance.*

We

We mourn for the very diſhonourable behaviour of this man of God; but are we inſtructed for ourſelves? Is there no reſentment cheriſhed in our hearts, for which we might be ſeverely rebuked? Let us enquire, "Doeſt thou well to be angry?" Are we not diſpoſed to murmur at God's diſpenſations, and in a haſty ſpirit wiſh ourſelves out of the world? Is there no gourd, no earthly comfort, on which we have fooliſhly placed our affections, and for the loſs of which we are inconſolable? Are we not ready to ſay, What good ſhall my life do me, ſince the deſire of my eyes is removed? We aſk again, "Doeſt thou well to be angry?" O vindicate not ſuch pride and petulance as this, but confeſs your guilt, and implore forgiveneſs!

The hiſtory will teach us to rejoice in the rich and ſovereign mercy of God, who can pardon returning ſinners, even when their caſe ſeems deſperate. Let not "our eye be evil, becauſe He is good *." Rather, let us praiſe Him, when thoſe, whom we gave up as loſt, are found,—thoſe, who were dead, are alive again †. But alas! like Jonah, we can feel much more for our own trifling concerns, than for the glory of God, and the ſalvation of our fellow creatures. Do we wonder at the forbearance of God toward his perverſe ſervant? O forget not your own ingratitude and obſtinacy; and then be aſtoniſhed at the patience, which He has exerciſed toward you. Still He ſtrives with you; and ſtill you grieve his Spirit. O when will this warfare ceaſe? Are you not longing for your full deliverance from the body of ſin and death, when you

* Matt. xx. 15. † Luke xv. 32.

ſhall

ſhall offend and diſhonour your God no more, but love and obey Him without wearineſs or imperfection for ever?

The ſubject may appear unintereſting to thoſe, who neither lament nor perceive the ſad depravity of our nature, and who ridicule the complaints of ſuch as are oppreſſed with a painful ſenſe of it. But could they be prevailed on to give a ſerious and minute attention to what paſſes within their own minds, they would ſoon diſcover that matters are worſe with themſelves than they apprehend, and would ſee enough to fill them with ſurpriſe, and ſhame, and horror.

But let not the caſe of Jonah be abuſed. You are pleaſed, perhaps, to hear of the failings of good men, as you hope, on this ground, to excuſe or palliate your own iniquity. You are well ſatisfied with yourſelves; you acknowledge indeed that you have your defects, yet think it a ſufficient plea, that none of us are perfect. But we warn you, that ſin, if not ſincerely renounced, hated, and repented of, will bring down the curſe of a juſt and holy God. It is true, "the fleſh luſteth againſt the Spirit" in the moſt excellent perſons*. Yet they "walk not after the fleſh," for they are waging continual war againſt it. On the contrary, you perform a willing ſervice to it; and therefore that ſentence lies in full force againſt you, "If ye live after the fleſh, ye ſhall die†."

* Gal. v. 17. † Rom. viii. 1, 13.

HEZEKIAH.

CHAP. XI.

Hezekiah, his accession to the throne—began the work of reformation—kept a remarkable passover—destroyed idolatry—prospered—eminent in faith—attacked by Sennacherib—prepared for a vigorous defence—his unbelieving apprehensions—his application to God—delivered from the Assyrians—magnified in the sight of the nations—struck with a mortal sickness—miraculously recovered—praised God—visited by Babylonian ambassadors—sinned—reproved—humbled and pardoned—died lamented.

WHILE we contemplate the principal characters in scripture, we are presented with a view of the Church of God in different and successive periods of time. It has passed, we find, through various and considerable changes of situation: but, amidst all its dangers and distresses, the same watchful eye has been attentive to its wants, the same Almighty hand stretched out for its defence. "Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth up, may Israel now say, yet they have not prevailed against me*." We have also an infallible assurance that the Lord, "who dwelleth in Zion," will protect it to the end; for "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it †."

* Psal. cxxix. 1, 2.

† Matt. xvi. 18.

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The kingdom of Judah, in which alone the true worſhip of God remained, was reduced to a very low ſtate. Its ſtrength had been exhauſted by the defeats and captivities, which it ſuffered under the reign of Ahaz: and, through the impiety of that prince, little even of the appearance of religion was left; for the people were ſunk into the groſſeſt idolatry. At ſuch a juncture, therefore, what could be looked for, but that God would give them up to utter deſolation, as he ſoon afterwards did the kingdom of Iſrael? Yet we are called to behold his diſtinguiſhing mercy to them. Then, indeed, He is generally pleaſed to interpoſe in behalf of his Church, when all other hopes fail, when human ſuccours are cut off, or prove ineffectual: thus He ſecures the glory to himſelf.

He could not be unmindful of his own promiſe, "I will make the horn of David to bud*;" and therefore, at different periods, in completion of his Covenant he reſtored that favoured family to a proſperous condition. He "raiſed up the tabernacle of David, that was fallen, and cloſed up the breaches thereof†." When "He will work, who ſhall let it?" In a way we cannot deviſe, He provides ſuitable means for his own purpoſes; and whenever his counſels are ripe for execution, the proper inſtrument is at hand. No good could have been expected from the immediate deſcendant of Ahaz: but we behold his ſon and ſucceſſor, Hezekiah, eminent for wiſdom, piety, and zeal. The hiſtory will encourage us to hope, when matters ſeem

* Pſal. cxxxii. 17. † Amos ix. 11.

deſperate,

desperate, and should excite us to pray, that He, who has all hearts "in his rule and governance," would stir up the spirit of princes, to maintain and promote his cause in the world.

Years before Christ, 726. Hezekiah came to the throne in the vigour of youth, when he was only twenty-five years old *. At such an age, men in general are eager to gratify their passions, and can ill resist the temptation to sensual pleasures, which the accession of wealth and power will ever furnish. But let persons of rank, even in early life, contemplate this exemplary pattern, and learn to "flee youthful lusts." Though his education, probably, was extremely unfavourable, he began his reign as if he had been long established in religious principles: for his very first concern was, to abolish idolatry, and to call back his subjects to the knowledge and worship of the Lord God of their fathers. We view with astonishment and delight his readiness to enter upon the arduous work of reformation, his unwearied diligence and steadfast perseverance in it. Immediately he turned his attention to the temple, which had been neglected and profaned; and, after the proper preparations and repairs, he opened the doors of the Lord's house, and restored the public services. The Priests and Levites seem to have deserted their post, till their prince remanded them to it. He became a preacher of righteousness to the ministers of religion, with great seriousness of address exhorting them to return to the faithful discharge of their office. Even in the first month of his first year, he himself

* 2 Kings xviii. 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxix. 1, &c.

went up, together with the rulers of the city, to the courts of the Lord, and there celebrated a holy feſtival with many ſacrifices and much thankſgiving to God. An amazing change appeared likewiſe in the diſpoſitions of the people, for God had prepared their hearts; and therefore with the utmoſt alacrity they joined in the ſolemnities of worſhip.

The good king of Judah, encouraged by theſe attempts, determined to proceed further. He ſummoned all his ſubjects throughout the land of Judah, and invited alſo the Iſraelites of the ten tribes, who had long been ſeparated from them, to aſſemble at Jeruſalem in the ſecond month, that they might keep the paſſover together, and by that ſacred ordinance renew their covenant with God *. The meſſengers were diſpatched, and the proclamation, which called to penitence and prayer, was publiſhed without delay.

We are not ſurpriſed, that in a nation ſunk ſo low, as that of the Iſraelites, a propoſal of this nature met with ſome contempt and ridicule. Amongſt them the ambaſſadors were ſcorned and inſulted. Thoſe who are zealous for reformation, in any age or country, where ignorance and ſin have long prevailed, muſt look for a ſimilar treatment. Satan has of old practiſed the ſame device, and to this day he endeavours to obſtruct the uſefulneſs of the faithful ſervants of Chriſt, by exciting the laugh of fools againſt them. Be not, however, diſcouraged, though you have "trial of cruel mockings." The Lord will put an honour upon ſuch as honour Him, and will generally give ſucceſs to their

* 2 Chron. xxx. 1, &c.

ſchemes

ſchemes for his glory, though not to the extent, perhaps, which they deſire.

Some even of Iſrael accepted the invitation, and came with unfeigned humility to bow before God. But throughout Judah there was no oppoſition. The Lord poured out upon them ſuch an influence of his Spirit, that they unanimouſly obeyed the ſummons, and an immenſe congregation aſſembled according to the wiſhes of the king. For fourteen days together the holy ſolemnity continued, and an uncommon fervour of devotion appeared in all the company. They began with deſtroying the idolatrous altars, which had been erected in Jeruſalem, and then proceeded to ſacrifice the paſſover, and to worſhip Jehovah according to his own inſtituted rites. The miniſters of religion were diligently employed, teaching the people "the good knowledge of the Lord," as well as offering up their prayers and praiſes to heaven. Indeed the zeal of their prince excited them to a pious emulation; for he ſtood and encouraged them in the faithful performance of their duty.

Several circumſtances in their celebration of this feſtival were not exactly conformable to the original appointment. Many, who had come in haſte, eſpecially from the tribes of Iſrael, were ceremonially unclean; yet they were permitted to partake of the ſacred feaſt, and, through the interceſſion of Hezekiah, were pardoned and accepted.[f] In caſes of real neceſſity, our gracious God diſpenſes with the obſervance of his own poſitive commands; and at all times He requires

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a proper disposition of the heart, more than a punctual compliance with external formalities.

The ordinance was ended, but the congregation did not cease from their religious ardour. They spread themselves throughout the land, doubtless under the direction of their prince; and, while they testified their regard to the true God, they took such steps as might prevent the nation from returning to their former abominations *. They brake the images, cut down the groves, destroyed the altars, removed the high places, which even some good kings had winked at, and dashed in pieces the brazen serpent, which Moses had erected, because it was abused to the purposes of idolatry.

That the reformation might be complete and abiding, Hezekiah restored the stated services of the temple, required the Priests and Levites to preserve their appointed courses, and provided for their future support. In these and all other regulations for the honour of God and the advancement of true religion, he discovered an unshaken integrity and firmness of mind, and his pious schemes were attended with remarkable success.

And shall such an example produce no correspondent influence upon us? Do we not perceive and admire the excellency of this character? Is it not obvious, that one such person may be a blessing to thousands? And shall we not, then, in our respective places, exert our abilities to check the prevalence of iniquity, and to promote the knowledge and worship of God? It is desirable, that the fervour and activity of youth should

* 2 Chron. xxxi. 1, &c.

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be thus employed. What nobler object can it have? Besides, piety in early life promises more extensive usefulness, than at a later period. If you begin the work of God betimes, you possess a vigour, that will support you in the difficulties of it; and you may be spared for many years, to prosecute and complete your plans. What, though long customs and general examples around you oppose your wishes, and seem to represent the case as desperate? Try at least what can be done, in the strength of God, and with prayer for his blessing. Call upon others to join their labours with yours, and, if you are intrusted with authority, command their attendance in their proper offices, and exhort them to a faithful discharge of their duty. But you must animate them by your own conduct, and go before them in every laudable attempt, if you expect their concurrence. Many even of your inferiors may deride and insult you: but, if you persevere in spite of contempt and reproach, you will probably see much good produced. Nay, some, whom you little thought of, may be stirred up to carry your designs into effect. "The hand of the Lord" may be upon them to induce their ready compliance. Only endeavour to copy the eminent pattern before you, in this respect; whatever work you begin for the honour of God, do it with all your heart, and doubt not that you will prosper.

We have beheld the zeal and activity of the Jewish prince to restore and establish the stated administration of the divine ordinances in the temple. And shall we not allow, that a serious attention and regard to the public services of religion is indispensably requisite in

men of all ranks? We are favoured with the instituted means of grace: the house of prayer is open; and the ministers of Christ "teach the good knowledge of the Lord." But are you thankful for the privilege? Do you not refuse your presence, and despise the worship and the word of God? If your churches were shut, and your teachers removed, would you lament or feel the loss?—The holy solemnities at Jerusalem were expensive: the long journeys, the tithes, and sacrifices, called for considerable sums of money. Not so the ordinances, to which the Gospel invites you. No labour in travelling, no costly offerings are necessary. Yet we grant, that liberality in Christian worshippers is highly honourable, and may be of extensive benefit. Nor will you lose any thing, if, like Hezekiah, you are willing to communicate for the support and advancement of true religion in the world.

The king of Judah prospered in the civil administration of his government: for the Lord, whom he served, gave remarkable success to his political enterprises. He subdued the Philistines, and cast off the yoke of the Assyrians, to whom the nation had been subjected. Yet after some years, it pleased God to try him in a very sharp manner, by suffering his enemies to gain such advantages over him, that he was reduced to the lowest state of distress. This distress, however, tended to display the peculiar excellence of his character, his unreserved reliance upon God: and in no part of his life did he appear more illustrious, than at the critical period, which we are hastening to consider. Doubtless, he possessed other eminent qualifications,

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but the ſacred hiſtorian has diſtinguiſhed him for his faith, above all who ſat on the throne of Judah. Nor does God uſually permit this grace, where he has beſtowed a ſingular meaſure of it, to lie dormant. For his own glory and for the encouragement of others, He brings it forth to public view, and by his ſevereſt diſpenſations ſhews, what ſupport it can adminiſter to the ſoul. There are few inſtances recorded, in which the efficacy of believing has been more ſignally exhibited.

Years before Chriſt, 713. In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah, Sennacherib the proud prince of Aſſyria, provoked by his refuſal of ſubmiſſion, made a very formidable invaſion into his country, and penetrated nearly to his capital*. He had already deſtroyed or led captive the ten tribes of Iſrael; and now he threatened an entire deſolation to the ſiſter kingdom. "He came up againſt all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them."—What, then, was the ſtate of Hezekiah? He prepared for a vigorous reſiſtance, and uſed the wiſeſt precautions to annoy the enemy and to fortify the town. This might be perfectly right: for the firmeſt dependence upon God does not render human foreſight and diligence unneceſſary. When, therefore, he had appointed his captains of war, he exhorted them to ſuſtain the ſiege with an undaunted courage, from a confident expectation of the divine interpoſition in their favour. "There be more with us," ſaid he, "than with the king of Aſſyria: With him is an arm of fleſh;

* 2 Chron. xxxii. 1, &c. Iſa. xxxvi. 1, &c.

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but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles."

Yet we are obliged to remark a sad failure in that very principle, for which he was eminent. Many of his princes, without consulting the Lord, and contrary to the directions of the prophet Isaiah *, went to solicit the assistance of the Egyptians; and we fear this was done by the consent, if not the command, of Hezekiah. But their hopes of relief from this quarter were disappointed: and it is in mercy that God is pleased to defeat the plans of his people, when they are trusting to the aid of men. How frequently has that sentence been verified, "The strength of Pharaoh shall be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion!"——When these succours did not arrive, the king of Judah seems to have given way to a sinful distrust. Alas! we mourn for his weakness: but we have not known a believer, whose faith has never staggered. Instead of engaging, and simply relying upon, the Lord's protection, he impoverished himself, and robbed the temple of its treasures and ornaments, that he might bribe Sennacherib to withdraw his forces. The scheme, however, soon failed; and we rejoice to find, that when his troubles increased upon him, he did not then waver, as he had done before, but maintained an unshaken dependence on his God.

A short time after, Sennacherib, intent upon the destruction of Jerusalem, sent his Generals with an

* Isa. xxx and xxxi.

immense

immenſe army to inveſt the city, and to ſummon Hezekiah to ſurrender. They came to the very walls; and, by an inſolent and blaſphemous meſſage to him, ridiculed not only his expectations from Egypt, but his truſt in Jehovah. They called upon the people to go forth, and deſert the prince who could no longer defend them, and promiſed them a ſtate of plenty and ſecurity under Sennacherib. To this however, agreeably to Hezekiah's direction, no anſwer was returned. For what would it avail to argue with thoſe, who are not afraid to vent their profaneneſs againſt God?

The pious king of Judah felt inexpreſſible diſtreſs*. He perceived that his ſituation was moſt critical, and that without a divine interpoſition he muſt fall a prey to his enemies. No country had been able to withſtand the arms of the proud Aſſyrian; and, while Jeruſalem itſelf was ſurrounded by his numerous hoſts, not one friendly ally came to its aſſiſtance. Yet Hezekiah had a place of refuge, to which he then fled for ſafety. With outward tokens of humiliation and godly ſorrow he went up to the temple, probably in a public manner, accompanied by his nobles, and ſent to ſolicit the fervent interceſſions of Iſaiah for their relief. He received an immediate reply from the prophet, full of encouragement and conſolation, declaring in the name of Jehovah, that the profane and inſulting tyrant ſhould ſoon be conſtrained to depart from them, and ſhould periſh by the ſword.

The promiſe, doubtleſs, afforded a ſufficient ground for confidence: yet deliverance was delayed, and the

* 2 Kings, xix. 1, &c. Iſa. xxxvii. 1, &c.

Aſſyrians were ſtill permitted to rage againſt God and his people. Hezekiah had a freſh ſummons from them to ſurrender, and a letter from Sennacherib, expreſſing the moſt impious irreverence and defiance of Jehovah. He ſeems to have been more diſtreſſed by theſe indignities offered to his God, than by his own difficulties. Again he betook himſelf to the throne of grace, and with increaſing ardour of devotion. He ſpread the letter before the Lord, and thus referring the cauſe to his deciſion, beſought Him to interpoſe, and not to ſuffer his own glorious name to be any longer inſulted. The prayer of faith muſt finally prevail. The prophet was commiſſioned to confirm the divine promiſes to the king, and aſſure him of ſpeedy relief. Accordingly, that very night the Angel of the Lord went forth, and inſtantly deſtroyed no leſs than one hundred and eighty five thouſand of the Aſſyrian army. The blaſpheming tyrant, then, being utterly confounded, fled away with diſgrace, and left an immenſe ſpoil behind him. He eſcaped to his own land, but there he periſhed miſerably by the hands of his ſons. Ah! how vain is it to contend againſt Jehovah! "The triumphing of the wicked is ſhort."

This very ſingular hiſtory exhibits a ſtrong proof of the efficacy of a firm truſt and confidence in God. He will afflict, but not forſake his people. He may reduce them to ſuch extremities, that all hope may ſeem to be taken away. But thoſe are the ſeaſons, in which He generally appears for the manifeſtation of his power, faithfulneſs, and love. In the mean time they are required to evidence their ſimple and unreſerved depend-

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ence upon Him, and by fervent ſupplication to implore his help. It is well, when our troubles drive us to our knees; for thus only can we expect his gracious promiſes to be fulfilled in our deliverance. The example of Hezekiah teaches us, " that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." But does it not reprove our unbelief? How unwilling are we to reſt on the declaration of Jehovah! How deſirous to know, in what way He will ſave us! How impatient, when relief is delayed! But it is the peculiar province of faith, to derive ſupport from God, when all human reſources fail, and to wait for the completion of his word, though we ſee not how it can poſſibly be accompliſhed. " Lord, help our unbelief!" For how much does it prevent our comfort and advancement in religion! How often does it hinder and diſcourage us in prayer!

This ſignal deliverance, by the manifeſt interpoſition of the God of Iſrael in favour of his ſervant, excited the attention and wonder of ſurrounding nations. They looked with the utmoſt veneration to the man, who had been ſo remarkably diſtinguiſhed by Heaven, and were eager to conciliate his regard by many valuable preſents. Thus, after a ſevere trial, " he was magnified," and enjoyed a large meaſure of riches and honour even to the end of life. " O love the Lord, all ye his ſaints: for the Lord preſerveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer. Be of good courage, and he ſhall ſtrengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord *."

* Pſal. xxxi. 23, 24.

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But in addition to the invaſion of Sennacherib, and about the ſame time, Hezekiah ſuffered another very ſharp affliction. A ſudden attack of a dangerous diſeaſe brought him to the confines of the grave; and a meſſage from God alſo bad him prepare to leave the world*, inaſmuch as the ſickneſs, in its kind and tendency, was certainly fatal. Here again he betook himſelf to God as his only refuge, and poured out his ſoul with importunate ſupplication for a longer continuance in life.

We admire the ardour of his devotion expreſſed on that occaſion, but are ſurpriſed at his unwillingneſs to die. Is there any thing truly terrible in the proſpect of departure, to thoſe who are accepted of God in his Covenant? Is it not diſhonourable to their character, to diſcover any fears of the change, or any ſtrong attachment to their preſent ſtate? But, ſurely, pious perſons, as well as others, through the common infirmities of nature, may ſhrink back from their diſſolution: and only in proportion to the livelineſs of their faith, will eternity appear deſirable to them. Not to inſiſt, however, on this conſideration, the peculiar circumſtances of Hezekiah's ſituation might juſtify the earneſtneſs of his wiſhes and petitions for a recovery, not ſo much on his own account, as on that of the Church and nation, for which he was deeply concerned. It would ſeem, doubtleſs, a matter of triumph to his enemies, if he ſhould be cut off at ſuch a critical juncture, and, as it might be conſtrued, under the divine diſpleaſure. Judah would be left without a guide,

* 2 Kings xx. 1, &c. Iſa. xxxviii. 1, &c.

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expofed to all the fury and violence of the Affyrians. The reformation, alfo, which he had introduced, was then only in its infancy, and confequently fo weak, that he might have reafon to dread a general return of the people to idolatry, upon his removal. The honour of God, therefore, was connected with his life; and on this ground, with a view to further ufefulnefs, he might properly afk for the ftroke to be averted or delayed. Befides, it is probable that at the time of his ficknefs he had no child, and that the fucceffion was unprovided for. Perhaps he feared, that the family of David, to which the promifes were made, would be extinct, and therefore that the expectations of the Saviour would fail. Diftreffing apprehenfions of this kind might well conftrain him to weep and to pray.

This part of the hiftory, however, holds out to us frefh encouragement to cry unto God in our troubles. How aftonifhing have been the effects of prayer! Hezekiah received an immediate anfwer from heaven, by the prophet Ifaiah, affuring him of the divine favour and determination to defend him from all his enemies, declaring alfo, that on the third day he fhould be perfectly reftored, and that fifteen years fhould be added to his life. For the cure of his difeafe an application was directed, which, though fuitable in itfelf, the power of the Lord only rendered fuccefsful: and, for the confirmation of his faith, the fhadow of the fun was carried back ten degrees, and the light confiderably protracted in a miraculous manner.

On fuch a fubject it becomes us to paufe, and enquire, What think we of death? Should any mortal

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ſickneſs attack us, are we ready? Soon will the ſummons be irrevocably iſſued out, " Thou ſhalt die, and not live." What, then, will be our hope, when God ſhall take away our ſouls? Is it not neceſſary now, to " ſet our houſe in order," and to ſettle both temporal and ſpiritual concerns? Have we done this? Or are we not immoderately attached to the world? For what end do we deſire to be ſpared any longer? Or are we anſwering any uſeful purpoſe here?

Perhaps we have been raiſed like Hezekiah, when our recovery ſeemed impoſſible. Then what returns are we making? Better had it been for us to have been cut off years ago, than to perſevere in the habits of ſin. The king of Judah ſhewed the warmeſt gratitude for his deliverance. He went up to the temple to celebrate the divine goodneſs; and the ſacred hymn, written by himſelf, in which he expreſſed his pious affections upon that occaſion, is handed down to us*. Shall we not ſay with him, " The living, the living, he ſhall praiſe thee, as I do this day?" The vows of the Lord are upon us: O let us be mindful of them, and uſe our reſtored ſtrength for his glory!

Hezekiah has hitherto appeared, not indeed a ſpotleſs character, but one of peculiar eminence. Yet the inſpired hiſtorians have remarked a defect in his obedience, ſoon after his recovery, for which he was very ſharply reproved and threatened by God himſelf. His declenſion, however, was not of any long continuance, nor of ſo groſs or notorious a kind, as to expoſe him to the reproaches of the world. The Lord God ſees

* Iſa. xxxviii. 9—20.

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the inward workings of our minds; and it is possible, we may depart from him, and come under his displeasure, whilst our outward conduct is approved and admired amongst men.

The impressions of gratitude, which he felt upon his miraculous cure, were of short duration; and perhaps from a conceit of his own importance on account of the distinguished favours he had received, "his heart was lifted up *." In such a disposition he was ill prepared to resist a temptation, which flattered his vanity. The king of Babylon, probably to court his friendship, sent ambassadors to him with large presents, and letters of congratulation on his very extraordinary restoration from sickness. Hezekiah might have shewn them all proper civility and kindness without violating any principles of religion. But he seems to have been carried away by pride, and foolishly to have exulted in the honourable notice taken of him. Instead of instructing these idolatrous princes in the knowledge of Jehovah, he made a display of his own grandeur before them, and with much self flattery and conceit exhibited his palaces and treasures.——Ah! how prone we are, to assume a consequence to ourselves, and to rob God of his glory! Are you not in danger of being lifted up, especially when God prospers you, and of forgetting to whom the praise is due? This is highly displeasing to Him, and may bring upon you the heaviest calamities. Be afraid, then, of looking on your houses, your furniture, and possessions, except with devout thankfulness to God, and a holy suspicion of yourselves.

* 2 Chron. xxxii. 25, &c.

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Does it appear ſtrange, that he, who had diſcovered ſuch a firmneſs in religious principles, ſhould be overcome by the ſmiles of a Pagan monarch? Alas! "Man, being in honour, hath no underſtanding." But waving this conſideration, we are never ſecure without the ſupport of divine grace. If that good influence be withdrawn, the moſt eminent ſaints will fall from their ſteadfaſtneſs. Thus the ſacred hiſtorian has explained the declenſion of Hezekiah: "God left him to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart." Probably, he had not conceived himſelf to be ſo vain and fooliſh: and this ſad experience of the depravity of his heart might have a ſalutary effect, by producing more genuine humility, faith, and love.

Thus alſo we account for ſome awful inſtances of miſconduct, in very excellent perſons among ourſelves. Their attainments and perſeverance in righteouſneſs are to be aſcribed to the continual aſſiſtance of the Spirit. But if He deſert them, they are liable to be carried away by every temptation. He will not, indeed, leave them utterly, or with any other view than to promote their greater good. Yet this repreſentation abaſes our pride, convinces us of our need of "the blood of ſprinkling," and teaches us to "walk humbly with our God."

The leaſt deviation from holy principles is hateful to God; and therefore Hezekiah's vanity did not paſs unnoticed or unpuniſhed. Iſaiah was diſpatched with a ſolemn reproof and denunciation of wrath againſt him and his people. It is frequently obſerved, that offend-

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ers are chastened even by those things and persons, which have caused them to transgress. Thus it was declared, that the very men, to whom he had paid his court, should seize upon all his boasted treasures, and reduce his descendants to the meanest captivity. Ah! what an unwelcome message to an ambitious mind! yet we rejoice to see the meek behaviour of the king under this rebuke. He humbled himself before God, and thus obtained a respite. He was then assured, that the threatened desolation should not come in his days; which constrained him to cry out, in admiration of the distinguished mercy extended to him, "Good is the word of the Lord concerning me." What other evidence of contrition can we give, but an unreserved confession of our guilt, an acknowledgment of the justice of the sentence by which we are condemned, and earnest cries for the remission of our sins? Have we such proofs of the truth of our repentance?

Hezekiah, then, was almost instantly recovered; and his sincerity appeared not more before, than after, his fall. We adore the grace, which can pardon and restore a backslider. From that time he continued uniformly steadfast in the practice of righteousness, and increased in power, riches, and honour, during the sequel of his reign. The nation enjoyed singular prosperity under his government; and when he was taken from them at the appointed period, they felt his loss. They bore testimony to his exalted worth, for "they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David, and did him honour at his death." A better

recompence awaited him in the world of glory; and, at the reſurrection of the juſt, he will receive the public approbation of men, of angels, and of God. Who does not ſay, "Let me die the death of the righteous?" Then "be followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promiſes," and "give diligence to make your calling and election ſure."

MANASSEH.

CHAP. XII.

Manasseh came to the throne, very young—established idolatry—practised witchcraft, and other Pagan impieties—a bloody persecutor—taken prisoner to Babylon—his repentance; prayer, and forgiveness—restored to his kingdom—gave full proof of his conversion—but could not repair the mischief of his former conduct.

FROM the piety, zeal, and diligence of Hezekiah in the work of reformation, which we have been contemplating, we were ready to promise a long continuance of religion and happiness to the kingdom of Judah. But our expectations are disappointed, and we behold the utmost desolation suddenly introduced. Here, then, the wise man's assertion is verified, "One sinner destroyeth much good *." Hezekiah had been many years rearing a stately edifice, and with much care and labour had just brought it to perfection, when an enemy entered and laid it in ruins. But what impious hand dared to demolish that goodly structure, which he had been so anxious to erect? This surprises us the more: it was one of his own house; it was one pro-

* Eccles. ix. 18.

ceeding from his own bowels; it was "Manaſſeh his ſon, who reigned in his ſtead *."

Years before Christ, 698. He came to the crown, when he was but twelve years old. It was a misfortune to him and to the public, that he was deprived of the guide and inſtructor of his youth at ſo early a period. Yet we might have expected, that his father's example would have left a ſtrong impreſſion upon him, even at that age, and that the religious friends and tutors, to whoſe care he was committed, would have been a conſiderable reſtraint. It ſhould ſeem, however, that immediately on his acceſſion he began to ſet aſide the excellent regulations, which had been eſtabliſhed, and ſoon became the patron of idólatry, and of almoſt every ſpecies of iniquity.

We ſtand amazed, and aſk, Where is the advantage of a good education? Alas! ſomething more is wanted, to fix and preſerve right principles in the heart. The depravity of human nature is ſufficient to break down every barrier; and ſometimes it appears the more violent and deſperate, for having been ſubject to a temporary control. Hence, perhaps, many young perſons, when releaſed from the ſtrict injunctions of teachers and governors, have diſcovered a ſingular effrontery in wickedneſs. But, ſurely, it is a high aggravation of a ſinner's guilt, that he diſregards the inſtructions and admonitions he has received, and departs from the ways of righteouſneſs, in which he was trained up. The prayers, the counſels, and examples of pious parents, which might have been a peculiar bleſſing,

* 2 Kings, xx. 21. xxi. 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxxiii. 1, &c.

will

will prove the curse and condemnation of thousands. O that children would consider their present favourable opportunities, and the account they must render to God!

Who will not allow the extreme and total degeneracy of man, while he reviews the folly, madness, and complicated crimes of the former part of Manasseh's life? Forsaking the worship of Jehovah, and not even permitting it among his subjects, he rushed at once into all the absurd and vile abominations of the heathen, and established them in his own nation. He renewed the idolatrous altars and groves, which his father had destroyed, and bowed down to the image of Baal, as well as to all the host of heaven. Not content with practising this profaneness himself, he seduced his people into it, till they became worse than the ancient inhabitants of Canaan, who had been extirpated for the very same things.——It appears strange, that idolatry has prevailed in every age of the world, and amongst the greatest number of the human race. Where is our boasted reason, and the excellency of our understanding, since we are so ready to depart from the true God, and to pay divine honours to a creature? Such a religion as this, is as disgraceful to man, as it is odious and provoking to Jehovah.

It is mentioned as an aggravation of Manasseh's impiety, that he introduced his pagan rites into the temple of the Lord, and even set up an image of Baal in the very place, where Jehovah had fixed his peculiar residence. We wonder at such an instance of daring presumption. How could he enter those sacred walls,

and not feel the ſharpeſt reproof? Or could he ever forget, to whom that houſe was dedicated? Divine worſhip was thus utterly ſubverted, and the Lord God himſelf excluded from his own habitation. What was this, but, as it were, to inſult him to his face, and to challenge Him to vindicate his honour againſt the idols, which were exalted above Him?

Manaſſeh, in the progreſs of his reign, became a father: but how baſe his character in that relation! Some, at leaſt, of his children he devoted to the gods of the heathen; "he made them paſs through the fire." It has been ſuppoſed, that they were offered up in ſacrifice; for ſuch a cuſtom, we know, prevailed *. But it has alſo been maintained, that they were only by certain ſuperſtitious ceremonies dedicated to ſome falſe Divinity, whom they were taught to acknowledge. The true God, then, was ſet aſide, and in His ſtead the very devils were conſulted. Accordingly the king proceeded to ſuch a length, as to practiſe witchcraft, and deal with evil ſpirits. We enquire not, of what ſort that intercourſe is, which Satan and his infernal company have been permitted to hold with men. The reality of it is ſufficiently evident from the prohibitions of God himſelf †.

If any thing more can be added, to complete the ſum of Manaſſeh's wickedneſs, it is this conſideration, that he was a cruel oppreſſor and a bloody perſecutor. He muſt, indeed, have been actuated by an uncommon degree of ferocity and rage, for "he ſhed innocent blood, very much, till he had filled Jeruſalem from one

* Pſal. cvi. 37, 38. † Deut. xviii. 10—12.

end

end to another." What rendered this wanton barbarity the more atrocious was, that he exerciſed it, moſt probably, againſt the faithful ſervants of Jehovah, and in contempt of their ſolemn admonitions. The Lord ſent prophets to warn, reprove, and threaten him; yet neither he nor his people would hearken. He perſiſted, with the utmoſt obduracy, in all his vile practices, as if he defied the indignation of Heaven. The awful declarations of God's meſſengers could not but be very offenſive to him; and perhaps with a view to get rid of theſe troubleſome monitors, and to extirpate all their adherents, he put ſuch immenſe numbers of them to death. It is ſuppoſed, that the venerable Iſaiah, who had been his father's friend and counſellor, fell a ſacrifice to his fury, and that he was "ſawn aſunder," as a peculiar example of vengeance. How much more enviable the ſtate of the martyr, than that of the royal murderer! This avowed oppoſition to the calls of God conſtituted the worſt part of Manaſſeh's character, and ſeemed to point him out as ripe for ruin. How many are in like manner rendered inexcuſable, by the repeated warnings given them! "This is the conde nation, that light is come into the world, and men lc ed darkneſs rather than light, becauſe their deeds were evil*." "If I had not come," ſaid the Saviour, "and ſpoken unto them, they had not had ſin: but now they have no cloak for their ſin†."

What then do we learn from this black picture? Does it not mortify our pride, to obſerve how far we may depart from truth and righteouſneſs? We ſee

* John, iii. 19. † xv. 22.

from one instance and another, what folly, cruelty, profaneness, and presumption man is capable of, even under the greatest advantages. Have you been preserved from such enormities? Be thankful that you were not exposed to the temptations, which have insnared others; but lay your hand upon your mouth, under a conviction of your own extreme depravity. Enough you yourselves have done, to strip you of every plea before God.

From the atrocious wickedness, which marks the former part of Manasseh's life, we could have expected nothing but the most tremendous consequences in the conclusion. The Lord, indeed, had testified by his prophets, that his fierce anger was kindled, and that He would take signal vengeance. We ask, then, what became of Manasseh? "He, that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy*." This were just in every case; but in many instances, of the kind here described, the claims of justice are withdrawn, that the rich and sovereign grace of our God may be the more gloriously displayed: thus "mercy rejoiceth against judgment †." In the history before us, the scene suddenly changes; and, when we were looking for utter destruction, we behold an astonishing salvation effected. The view is so wonderful, that it excites the most devout admiration, and constrains us to cry out, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

* Prov. xxix. 1. † James, ii. 13.

Manaſſeh received a ſevere chaſtiſement for his iniquity. The providence of God ſo ordered it, that the Aſſyrians were ſtirred up to invade his land, and he was given into their power. They took him priſoner, deprived him of his glory and kingdom, led him in chains to Babylon, and there probably caſt him into a dungeon. That ſituation, ſo diſgraceful and afflictive, under the influence of God's Spirit proved ſalutary to him. In that ſtate of retirement he was awakened to reflection; he ſaw and confeſſed the baſeneſs of his conduct, and cried unto God for pardon. Then the haughty rebel was ſubdued; and, after having exhibited a ſad ſpecimen of human depravity, he has afforded an inſtance of the freeneſs and extent of the divine mercy. Then the ſeeds of a pious education, which ſeemed to be loſt, began to revive, and the prayers of his deceaſed father to be anſwered.

We are not told, at what period of his life this alteration was brought about. He had previouſly perſiſted in a long courſe of ſin: and it was a happy circumſtance, that many ſucceeding years evinced the reality of his repentance. We pretend not to account for the change, on any other ground than the exertion of an almighty power. It was "the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Yet even what God himſelf does, He is pleaſed in moſt caſes to accompliſh by external means; and afflictions are often made uſe of in the great work of converſion. To recover men from the error of their ways, He ſeparates them from their evil companions, and deprives them of their former temptations and opportunities of wickedneſs: by

heavy pains and disappointments He bows down the pride of their hearts, and convinces them of the bitterness of sin: and, not unfrequently, He places them in retirement, to review and mourn over their past folly and madness. Thus many are subdued by suffering, who have obstinately resisted the milder methods of God's dealing with them; and then they reckon their severest chastisements among their choicest blessings.

Yet afflictions do not necessarily produce such changes as this, but derive all their energy from the influence of God's Spirit, through which alone they prove effectual. Some persons are the more hardened by their trials, and when "the hand of God presseth them sore," they discover greater enmity and rage against Him. Thus it is recorded of Ahaz, the grandfather of Manasseh, "in the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord *." Thus also in those extreme and endless torments, reserved for the finally impenitent, there will be no proper contrition, no humiliation. "They gnaw their tongues for pain, and blaspheme the God of heaven, because of their pains and their sores, and repent not of their deeds †."

What, then, is the account of Manasseh's conversion? The description is short, but satisfactory. "He humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers." The review of such a life, we readily allow, would furnish him with sufficient matter for the exercise of godly sorrow. But every real penitent, who has a right apprehension of the heinousness of sin, will feel the same occasion for self-abhorrence, as Manasseh.

* 2 Chron. xxviii. 22. † Rev. xvi. 10, 21.

Though

Though you have not committed thoſe groſs offences, which are miſchievous to ſociety, you are polluted by natural depravity, and your actual deviations from the law of righteouſneſs very juſtly expoſe you to the divine wrath; ſo that, if you underſtand your own ſtate and deſert, you will not ſcruple to adopt that confeſſion, "Behold, I am vile!" This will be the very firſt effect of true repentance.

Under a deep ſenſe of his guilt, Manaſſeh cried for mercy. "He beſought the Lord his God, and prayed unto him." The ſacred hiſtorian again and again takes notice of his prayer, which probably was moſt fervent and inceſſant. Nor can we conceive, that there is any ſpiritual conviction or unfeigned humiliation, where there are no ardent ſupplications for pardon. What more ſuitable expreſſion of a contrite heart, than "God be merciful to me a ſinner!" Such an importunate application to the God of all grace is a favourable ſign, and determines the character of a convert. For thus it was remarked of Paul, as an indiſputable evidence of his change, "Behold, he prayeth *."

"If ye ſeek the Lord, He will be found of you †." How many memorable inſtances verify the aſſertion! Manaſſeh ſtands as a conſpicuous example of the readineſs of our God to accept and to ſave the returning ſinner. "The Lord was entreated of him, and heard his ſupplication." His numerous and aggravated offences were all blotted out; and the poor culprit, trembling before his Judge, was lifted up, and comforted

* Acts ix. 11. † 2 Chron. xv. 2. Deut. iv. 29. Matt. vii. 7.

with

with the hope of forgiveneſs. O what a proof is here, that with Jehovah "there is plenteous redemption!"

God was graciously pleaſed to put Manaſſeh's ſincerity to the trial: for by a peculiar providence "He brought him again to Jeruſalem," and reſtored him to his kingdom. There he recovered his former dignity, and continued to reign for many years. We are anxious to hear, then, if, when his affliction was removed, he retained his religious impreſſions, and perſevered in a holy obedience. Nor are we left in doubt: full teſtimony was given, that he was "renewed in the ſpirit of his mind, and created in righteouſneſs and true holineſs." There may be inſtances of real converſion, at a late period, where no ſuch ſatisfactory evidences are afforded. Hereafter, we preſume, God will make them public, and juſtify himſelf in them, to the admiration of all.

"Then Manaſſeh knew, that the Lord, He was God." Could he poſſibly be ignorant of this? Had he not been early grounded in good principles? Had he not heard of his father's zeal to revive and eſtabliſh the worſhip of Jehovah? Had he not been informed, and could he forget, that "the Lord had made bare his arm," delivered Hezekiah from the Aſſyrians, and lengthened his life for fifteen years? Or were not theſe events a ſufficient proof, that "the Lord, He is God?" Alas! with a pious education, the moſt excellent inſtructions, and a full view of the ſtrongeſt teſtimonies in favour of religion, man may abide in darkneſs, neither will he attain any true ſpiritual acquaintance with God, till "the eyes of his underſtanding

ing be enlightened." Then, as in Manasseh's case, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines in the heart, to give the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." The information, we have received from others, should not suffice us; but we should pray, that, by "the manifestation of the Spirit," we may know the Lord.

Such a discovery of the divine nature and perfections will be of a practical tendency, and produce the best effects in regulating the conduct. The succeeding behaviour of Manasseh was consistent and honourable. Not to insist on his prudent attention to the defence of his dominions, we admire his zeal in endeavouring to repair the mischief he had done. He set himself, therefore, to banish the idolatry, which he had introduced. And will not all those, who abhor their iniquity, cease from it, and exert their influence to recover others? What shall we say, then, to such as are utterly unconcerned about the spiritual state of their friends and dependants, and have not themselves forsaken their old sins? Shall we credit their loud professions of penitence, or encourage their confidence in the divine forgiveness? Rather, we would solemnly warn them to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance," without which their professions are an insult to God; their confidence the grossest presumption.

The real convert rests not in a mere negative reformation; but, when he "ceases to do evil, he learns to do well." Manasseh was zealous to restore the service of Jehovah. The temple had been polluted by pagan rites, and all the true worshippers of God had been

been either ſlain, or forced to hide their heads. But the holy place was now opened again for its original purpoſe, and the king himſelf appeared there, to declare his devout regard, and to offer ſacrifices, to the Lord. Do you hope, that you alſo, like Manaſſeh, have been humbled greatly for your former contempt of religion? We expect to ſee you diligent in your exertions to promote it. You will recommend "the faith, which once you deſtroyed;" and, by your own ſerious attendance at the houſe and ordinances of God, will encourage others to come. Without ſuch poſitive fruits of righteouſneſs, ſuch a public teſtimony of your principles, we may juſtly doubt of your inward renovation.

Manaſſeh was ſolicitous to bring back the people to the Lord, and therefore commanded them to ſerve Him. He had ſeduced them into idolatry and other impious practices; and now he anxiouſly deſired them to return with him to that God, "from whom they had deeply revolted." Is it not alſo incumbent upon us, to give a ſimilar evidence of our ſincerity? For how many have we tempted to ſin? Doubtleſs, we ſhould endeavour to reclaim them: at leaſt, we ſhould declare our own compunction of heart for what we have done, and call their attention to that religion, which we find ſo neceſſary for ourſelves. But if we are afraid or aſhamed to maintain the cauſe of God before thoſe, whom we have induced to tranſgreſs, we poſſeſs not any proper regard to Him, or any ſtrong ſenſe of the evil, which we have committed.

It ſhould be remarked, however, that no reformation can atone to God for our offences, or take away their

bad

bad effects in the world. Repentance has been ſaid to be the only conſideration required for our pardon. But what recompence is this for the diſhonour we have caſt upon God; or what ſatisfaction to his juſtice? Or how can we compenſate for paſt failures, by that which is no more than our preſent duty? The Jews themſelves were taught, that "without ſhedding of blood is no remiſſion." We can add, "there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we muſt be ſaved," but only the name of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt; "in whom we have redemption THROUGH HIS BLOOD, even the forgiveneſs of ſins*."——Men fooliſhly talk of making amends for their tranſgreſſions. Let them try, as Manaſſeh, to repair the miſchief; and they will ſoon find it impoſſible. Doubtleſs, much good muſt have followed from his zealous endeavours, but by no means all that he wiſhed, or all that he might probably have effected, had he ſerved the Lord from his youth. It ſhould ſeem, that many would not forſake their idolatry, in which he had inſtructed them; and ſome years afterward the heavy judgments of God deſolated the nation, on account of his former wickedneſs, even though he had obtained forgiveneſs for his own ſoul†. You alſo, who are reconciled to God, and have confidence before Him, may be unable to prevent the temporal and everlaſting deſtruction of thoſe, whom you have ſeduced. Go, and recover them, if you can. Some of them, perhaps, have died in their ſins, and are loſt for ever: and of thoſe, who

* Heb. ix. 22. Acts iv. 12. Col. i. 14. † 2 Kings xxiv. 3, 4. Jer. xv. 4.

remain,

remain, how few will hear you; or, hearing, regard your admonitions? Posterity, for ages yet to come, may reap the bitter fruits of your iniquity. Who will not allow, then, even from a view of the mischiefs produced in society, that "sin is indeed exceeding sinful?"

May we presume to suggest a reason for the divine procedure, in selecting men of such an abandoned character as Manasseh, to be the objects of mercy? We confess, the counsels of God are a great deep, which we cannot fathom: yet some considerations upon the subject demand our attention. By such instances as these, the Lord affords the most striking exhibition of the nature and sufficiency of that Salvation, which He has effected by the incarnation, sacrifice, and intercession of his own Son. Since there is no difference, in the terms of acceptance, between one sinner and another; nay, since "where sin hath abounded, grace doth much more abound," we are compelled to join in that conclusion, "Not by works of righteousness, which we have done, but according to his mercy He saved us." Examples of this kind, indeed, are most offensive to persons of a Pharisaical disposition; because they perceive herein, that in this respect, at least, no account is made of their boasted righteousness, and no preference allowed them in the sight of God.

These cases, however, afford encouragement to the awakened penitent; and they seem to be recorded, that none may despair of being received in God's appointed way. While He suffers some to go the greatest lengths in wickedness, and then recovers them, He

shews

ſhews us, that "our Redeemer is ſtrong," and "mighty to ſave." Who now, that returns to God in penitence and faith, ſhall doubt of obtaining pardon, "though his ſins be as ſcarlet?" The atonement provided can expiate the moſt aggravated guilt; and thouſands have experienced its efficacy. Or who ſhall ſay, that our ſpiritual enemies are invincible? The Saviour, as we have ſeen in this hiſtory, can ſanctify the moſt polluted heart, and give power and ability to overcome the moſt inveterate habits of evil. Through His grace the fury of the lion is tamed, and ſucceeded by the meekneſs of the lamb: the place, where Satan erected his throne, and maintained an undiſturbed dominion, becomes an habitation for God. "Surely, ſhall one ſay, In the Lord have I righteouſneſs and ſtrength: even to Him ſhall men come; and all that are incenſed againſt Him ſhall be aſhamed *."

* Iſa. xlv. 24.

JOSIAH.

CHAP. XIII.

Josiah, his early accession to the throne—piety—zeal for reformation—fulfilled a prophecy at Bethel—restored the temple service—how affected, upon bearing the law—read it to the people, and bound them by covenant to God—celebrated the passover—possessed unequalled zeal—wounded in fighting against the king of Egypt—lamented at his death.

TRUE religion, which in every part of life is amiable and useful, is peculiarly so in youth. At that age, temptations to sensual pleasures are the strongest and most numerous; and then to resist the most importunate solicitations to evil, and, amidst an universal degeneracy of manners, to discover a firm and zealous attachment to the service of God, to prefer the enjoyment of his favour and the advancement of his glory to every worldly consideration,—this is real excellence, a sight which even Angels look down upon with delight. This, however, is an attainment, to which no principles of our depraved nature will lead us; it requires a large measure of divine grace. O may that grace be poured out upon our rising generation; for so may we expect a revival of truth and holiness amongst us!

Josiah,

Years before Christ, 641. Josiah, the king of Judah, will afford us a beautiful example of early piety, and of its beneficial effects. Upon his accession to the crown, we had every thing to fear concerning that corrupt nation; but a gleam of hope suddenly breaks in upon us, while we behold his good dispositions and unwearied exertions. Manasseh, his grandfather, had not been able to reform all the profane practices, which he himself had introduced; and soon after his death, the pleasing appearances of religion, which the people had assumed in compliance with their prince, were all thrown off. Amon, the next in succession, renewed the former idolatries through the land, but, after a short and wicked reign, fell by the hand of violence; and Josiah, then only eight years old, was placed upon the throne *. What could we look for from such a child, especially from one, surrounded with temptations and examples of iniquity? But it proved a mercy to him, that he was so early delivered from the influence of his abandoned father: for the care of his education from that period, probably, was committed to persons of virtuous principles, under whom he might receive the best instructions and impressions.

No particular account is given of him, till the sixteenth year of his age; but then, we are assured, his heart was truly affected with divine things, and the seeds of piety sprang up with uncommon vigour. "While he was yet young," says the sacred historian, "he began to seek after the God of David his father." His tutors might be the means, but the effect itself we

* 2 Kings xxii, 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxxiv. 1, &c.

ascribe entirely to the distinguishing mercy and powerful grace of God; since this is a temper of mind, which man by nature possesses not; "There is none that seeketh after God*." At the very time, when his passions were coming to their full strength, and all external circumstances were favourable to schemes of sensuality, Josiah dedicated himself to the service of his God, and was chiefly solicitous to please and to glorify Him.

What an exemplary pattern is here! We enquire of those in early life, Have you, like Josiah, consecrated your first and best years to God? Have you yet entered on a religious course, or even formed the plan of "seeking the Lord?" Ah! what means your levity, and contempt of every thing serious? Is it for old persons only to be devout? And will you be content to give the refuse of your days to Him, who made you? You plead your own peculiar snares, and difficulties; but surely they are not greater than Josiah's were. When you consider his case, you will not say, it is impossible to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth," but rather allow, that this is the most proper season of all.

Some indeed, who appeared to begin well, and discovered an ardent zeal, have grown weary and declined. Not so Josiah. His pious fervour was not a sudden and transitory flash, but a bright and steady flame, which long afforded an extensive light. At the age of twenty, and sooner perhaps he did not undertake the direction of public affairs, he called upon his people

* Rom. iii. 11

to

to join with him in serving the Lord, and exerted his whole strength and influence to promote those principles, the importance of which he had himself felt. We contemplate with delight the labours of this indefatigable prince, in reforming a corrupt nation, and recovering them once again to the worship of Jehovah.

Years before Christ, from 630 to 624

In the twelfth year of his reign he set himself to purge away the various abominations, which had spread throughout the land. It should seem, that he was diligently employed in this work to the eighteenth year, and that his good designs were not brought into effect till that time. Some of the grosser irregularities were corrected before; but then an entire abolition of idolatry, and of every thing pertaining to it, took place. The altars, the images, the groves, and the vessels made use of in their Pagan rites, were utterly destroyed: their priests also, who had supported these corruptions, were put down with marks of infamy, and many of them slain with the sword. It is obvious, that he had to conflict with very formidable difficulties, but the fervour of his zeal carried him through them all. He was not satisfied with issuing out his orders, or sending his officers to accomplish this change; but he himself went in procession through the kingdom, to see his commands executed. Still we should wonder, that he met with no violent oppositions, did we not ascribe his success to the over-ruling influence of God upon the minds of the people.

Shall we not pray, that God would endue the princes of the earth with the same spirit? It is surely in their pow[illegible]nder the commission of much evil;

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and, doubtless, they must answer for their connivance at the profane practices of their subjects. But leaving them, we should enquire rather, if we, in our several spheres, are using our utmost endeavours to prevent sin. Though you are not kings, magistrates, or preachers, have you no authority? Are there none, whom you might and should restrain? Are there no friends and acquaintance, living in ignorance and habits of wickedness, for whose dangerous condition you ought to be deeply concerned? Perhaps, they will listen to your instructions, counsels, and reproofs. Make the trial at least, from a regard to God; and your labour shall not be in vain. Is it proper in any case to attempt a reformation? Then why should not this work begin with you? If the love of ease, or fear of opposition render you averse to it, how unlike are you to Josiah!

It is remarkable, that in these zealous exertions he did not confine himself within the limits of his own particular dominion in Judah; for he exercised a similar authority in the cities of Israel, which were then subject to the Assyrians. By some means he had obtained permission for this purpose, that he might extend his usefulness the farther. It is unfaithfulness, cowardice, or sloth, which prompts us to ask, how far we are obliged to go, and makes us utterly indifferent about those, who are not expressly committed to our charge. If we are under the full influence of religious principles, like Josiah, we shall say, Are there any others of my fellow creatures whom I can benefit, any sinners whom I may recover to God?

Whilst

Whilst he burned the bones of the idolatrous priests upon Jeroboam's altar at Bethel, he fulfilled the divine prediction, in which he himself was described by name, and by which that particular office had been assigned him, three hundred and fifty years before; and it should seem, that he was ignorant of the prophecy, till he had literally accomplished it *. How wonderful is the knowledge of God, who sees through ages to come, as well as those which are past, and whose plans of operation, therefore, are not liable to mistakes, imperfections, or changes, as our's are! "Known unto Him are all his works from the beginning of the world."

Josiah was solicitous, not merely to correct irregularities, but to establish real godliness in the nation. He must have beheld, with much distress, the neglect and profanation of the temple; and therefore he commanded the proper officers to repair the building, for which large contributions had been collected, and to restore the appointed services in that sacred place. Such a concern for the observance of public worship will ever be the fruit of a pure zeal for God, and of a strong regard to the interests of religion. For by that institution, chiefly, the knowledge of divine truth is diffused, and the practice of holiness promoted in the world. What thanks and praise do we owe to God for the regular and quiet administration of his ordinances amongst us? Are we sensible of their value? Do we indeed rejoice and bless God, that houses of

* 1 Kings xiii. 2. 2 Kings xxiii. 15—20.

prayer are erected throughout our land; that they are not shut against us, or applied to profane purposes? Let us offer up our petitions, that our privileges may be continued to us and our posterity: and, while we are favoured with them, let us labour to improve them to our own spiritual advantage. Let us "serve the Lord with gladness, enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise, be thankful unto Him, and bless his name*."

During the repairs of the temple, Hilkiah the high-priest found the book of the law (probably the original writing deposited in the ark by Moses;) and so much had the word of God been neglected, so scarce were the copies of it, that the king himself, and even the ministers of religion seemed unacquainted with its contents. When it was presented to Josiah, and read before him, he discovered emotions of great anguish; for then he perceived, more than he had done, how very far the whole nation had departed from God, and to what tremendous denunciations of wrath they were exposed. Under this impression he sent to enquire of the Lord, whether it were possible in any way to avert the threatened vengeance. The divine oracle, by Huldah the prophetess, declared, that destruction should be poured upon Jerusalem and its inhabitants without remedy, for their long continued provocations; but that the pious prince, who had shewn such tenderness of heart and deep humiliation before God, should be mercifully removed from the evil to come.

* Psalm. c. 2, 4.

This

This is an inſtructive narration in all its circumſtances. It will teach us to value the word of God, and to be thankful for the frequent opportunities, which the pooreſt amongſt us enjoy of hearing and reading it for ourſelves. The times are bad indeed, when the Bible is put away or forgotten. An ignorance of religious principles will ever be favourable to the prevalence of iniquity; for if the ſolemn menaces of God againſt it are not known, there is no effectual barrier to reſtrain men from it. Yet, numerous as the copies of the ſacred ſcriptures are amongſt us, we fear that many receive no advantage from them. The book of revelation is ſtudiouſly kept out of ſight, or thrown aſide as troubleſome or uſeleſs furniture; and in ſome families it ſeems to be no more underſtood, than it was in the days of Joſiah.

Others, who have acquainted themſelves with the main ſubjects of it, evidently diſregard its moſt awful declarations. Are there not thoſe, who laugh at the very mention of thoſe torments, which are prepared for the ungodly? Ah! where is that tenderneſs of heart, which appeared in Joſiah? Come, and learn from him, to attend to the threatenings of God with real ſeriouſneſs of mind, to weep and to pray, when you hear to what puniſhment you are liable. Surely your contempt of the curſes of Scripture manifeſts an utter diſbelief of the whole. Were you truly perſuaded, that God means what He ſays, you could not but be deeply impreſſed: you would cry out, as the king of Judah, "Enquire of the Lord for me; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled againſt us." Such an en-

quiry, perhaps, never entered your thoughts: you ſeek not after the way of ſalvation, becauſe you feel no apprehenſions of danger: a plain proof, that the word of God paſſes with you for a fable.

Do you aſk, To what purpoſe ſhould we thus humble ourſelves? Let Joſiah's example anſwer: you will obtain peace and ſecurity. If you mourn with real contrition, you will be accepted through the Redeemer; and then, whatever may be the caſe of others, you ſhall not come into condemnation. Hear the declaration of Jehovah, "To this man will I look, even to him that trembleth at my word*." The world may deride you for a ſuppoſed weakneſs of underſtanding; but the God of heaven will approve your conduct. "The prudent man foreſeeth the evil, and hideth himſelf; but the ſimple paſs on and are puniſhed †."

No ſooner did Joſiah perceive the importance of the book of God, than he deſired to acquaint his ſubjects with it. He ſummoned all the elders of the nation, the miniſters both of church and ſtate, and all the inhabitants of Jeruſalem, and went with them in ſolemn proceſſion to the temple; nor was he aſhamed to appear as a preacher before them ‡. He read in their ears thoſe awful denunciations of the divine law, which had made ſo ſtrong an impreſſion on his own heart. There alſo he bound himſelf by an expreſs covenant to ſerve the Lord with a ſteadfaſt and unreſerved obedience, and required the whole congregation to enter into the ſame engagement. The greater part, we fear, yielded

* Iſa. lxvi. 2. † Prov. xxii. 3. ‡ 2 Kings xxiii. 1, &c.

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an hypocritical compliance, yet much good, doubtlefs, was effected; nor was there any open or grofs departure from the Lord, during the fequel of this reign.

It is of as much importance now, as it was in the days of Jofiah, that the people be called together to be inftructed in the oracles of God, that they be exhorted to dedicate themfelves to Him, and feal their vows before Him. If you love God or your fellow-creatures, you will rejoice, when the glad tidings of falvation are carried from one place to another, and finners are taught "the word of reconciliation." But do you labour to promote this purpofe, and contribute to it by your influence and example? If you wifh others to hear the fcriptures read and expounded, you too fhould be willing to hear them, and, like Jofiah, appear at the head of your family in the houfe of God, and there publicly declare your refolution, to be "his faithful foldiers and fervants unto your life's end." You will not be fatisfied, that the preachers of the Gofpel perform their office, but in your refpective departments you will "be fellow-helpers to the truth." You will fet up religion in your own habitations, endeavour to acquaint your children and domeftics with the book of God, and prefs them all to "join themfelves to Him in a perpetual covenant." No difficulties, reproaches, or oppofition fhould difcourage you from thus attempting to render yourfelves ufeful in your generation, by an exertion of your beft abilities. Nor fhould you doubt of fuccefs: at leaft, much evil will be prevented, and, perhaps, the hearts of many may be truly engaged to ferve the Lord.

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The prince and the people had bound themſelves to God, by the moſt expreſs promiſes, in the temple. But Joſiah was deſirous that their vows ſhould be ratified in a ſtill more ſolemn manner, by a public celebration of the paſſover *. That was their grand ordinance, and had probably ſunk into neglect; but then, throughout the kingdom, they were called to the ſtricteſt obſervance of it. The piety and zeal of Joſiah never appeared more eminent than on that occaſion. He was the foremoſt, and moſt active in the work of God, not only requiring the attendance of his ſubjects, but inſtructing and encouraging the prieſts and Levites in the diſcharge of their office. An immenſe multitude aſſembled, and, through the liberality of Joſiah and his nobles, numerous ſacrifices were offered to Heaven: and in the whole feſtival the utmoſt regularity and ſerìouſneſs prevailed. This paſſover was the moſt remarkable of any which had been obſerved from the days of Samuel; perhaps on account of the large company then preſent, and their compliance with the minuteſt circumſtances of the original appointment: for that in the time of Hezekiah, though celebrated with much fervour, was not exactly conformable to the law of Moſes.

It has been ſaid, that religion concerns only the common people, and ſerves as a ſtate engine to keep the vulgar in awe. But has this been the ſentiment of the truly wiſe and good in any age or country? " The excellent of the earth," even thoſe of moſt exalted rank, have not thought the divine ſervice be-

* 2 Chron. xxxv. 1, &c.

neath

neath their notice, but from a conviction of its importance for themſelves, have endeavoured to promote a general attention to it. Did the king of Judah plead an exemption; or ſhall we ſuſpect his ſincerity in this tranſaction? Was his ardour on the occaſion a reproach to his character? No; it is recorded to his honour; and it ſhould be our deſire to poſſeſs the ſame ſpirit. We do not ſolemnize the Jewiſh ordinance; but we ſhould wait on the Lord in his own inſtituted way. "Chriſt our paſſover is ſacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feaſt*;" let us ſurround his table, and, on the ground of his covenant, bind ourſelves by a vow to be his for ever.

We have ſeen Joſiah's liberality in forwarding the work of God, and ſhall we decline any neceſſary duties of piety, merely becauſe they are expenſive? It is incumbent upon us to "honour the Lord with our ſubſtance:" and this may be effected by various methods, though in the worſhip of the Chriſtian Church no coſtly offerings be required. "Let us not be weary in well-doing." "The liberal deviſeth liberal things, and by liberal things ſhall he ſtand †."

Thus lived and proſpered this amiable king, ſteadfaſtly perſevering in righteouſneſs. He was an extenſive bleſſing in his day; and he ſeemed to be raiſed up of God, on purpoſe that one more ſolemn warning might be given to the people of Judah before their entire deſolation. They complied with his regulations; and the ſervice of Jehovah continued to be maintained

* 1 Cor. v. 7, 8. † Gal. vi. 9. Iſa. xxxii. 8.

in its purity. But the generality of his ſubjects practiſed the baſeſt diſſimulation in their religious profeſſions *. There was therefore no remedy; for ſoon afterwards the threatened deſtruction came upon them, and they were carried captive to Babylon. "Be not deceived: God is not mocked." You may aſſume ſome fair appearances, and conform to the external rites of devotion; but if you "turn unto the Lord feignedly," you will fall under the heavier condemnation.

The character before us was moſt amiable, and is ſaid to have been unequalled, not, indeed in every reſpect, but in one leading feature. Joſiah ſurpaſſed all others in his zeal and activity to promote the honour of God. His whole heart was engaged in the work of reformation, and all his ſtrength put forth to accompliſh it. It was remarked, alſo, of his pious anceſtor, Hezekiah, that there was none like him for the firmneſs of his truſt and confidence in God. The moſt eminent ſaints, though they poſſeſs other good qualities, are generally diſtinguiſhed for ſome particular excellence, which attracts our notice and admiration. In each of them we perceive the efficacy of the grace of God, and ſee cauſe to be aſhamed of our own ſad deficiencies. May we ſo contemplate their examples, as not only to commend, but imitate, every-thing valuable in them!

Years before Christ, 610. Thirteen years after the laſt mentioned tranſactions, Joſiah went forth to battle againſt the king of Egypt, who was paſſing through

* Jer. iii. 6, 10.

his land to attack the Aſſyrians. He has been warmly cenſured for undertaking the expedition; but perhaps we are not ſufficiently acquainted with the circumſtances, to decide upon his conduct. There might be political reaſons, which would juſtify him as a ſtateſman, but, probably, he acted without due deliberation, and conſulted not the Lord or his prophets. Good men are liable to be betrayed into a wrong ſpirit; and God may ſometimes permit them to follow fooliſh and evil counſels, in order to puniſh thoſe with whom they are connected. It was ſo in the preſent inſtance; as we ſhall learn from the very awful event. Joſiah received a mortal wound in the engagement, and died as they conveyed him from Megiddo to Jeruſalem. Doubtleſs, he was removed in mercy to himſelf, that he might not behold the approaching deſolation of his country; but in judgment to the people, who, notwithſtanding the piety of their prince, were ripening for deſtruction. They were conſtrained, however, to confeſs his worth, when he was taken from them: and, while they felt their very heavy loſs, they mourned for him throughout all the nation, with expreſſions of deepeſt ſorrow. It is truly lamentable, that men in general know not the value of their own bleſſings, till they are deprived, in righteous puniſhment, for their contempt and abuſe of them.

If we cenſure Joſiah's laſt expedition, we ſhould be warned from it, to watch over our conduct and the tempers of our minds. Though we be eſtabliſhed in grace, yet, if at any time we be remiſs and negligent, we may be cut down in a way, which will be highly diſhonourable

diſhonourable to our profeſſion. "Therefore, be ye alſo ready:" be doing the work of the Lord, that, when He ſhall call, you may not be ſurpriſed or terrified, but cheerfully obey the ſummons; and, by the ſtrength and ardour of your faith and hope at that ſolemn ſeaſon, may inſtruct and comfort your ſurviving friends.

But if you are living in an habitual diſregard of God and his ſalvation, in what manner can you meet your diſſolution? Place the awful ſcene before you: imagine the time of your departure at hand: are you not confounded? What is your ſupport? Can you look at death with compoſure and confidence, and ſay, "I am perſuaded, that it ſhall not be able to ſeparate me from the love of God, which is in Chriſt Jeſus my Lord?" Do you not rather tremble in the "fearful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation, which ſhall devour the adverſaries?" O ſeize the preſent moment, and flee to Him, whoſe grace can ſo prepare you for your diſmiſſion, and invigorate you in it, that you may even then adopt the Apoſtle's triumph, "O death, where is thy ſting?—Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jeſus Chriſt*."

* 1 Cor. xv. 55, 57.

JEREMIAH.

CHAP. XIV.

Jeremiah, called to the prophetical office—joined with Josiah in promoting reformation—delivered from the men of Anathoth—discouraged—apprehended and arraigned—acquitted—sent Baruch to recite his prophecies—wrote to the captives in Babylon—his conference with Zedekiah—imprisoned—favoured with revelations—his bold reproofs, when released—cast into a dungeon—consulted by Zedekiah—rescued by Ebedmelech—continued in prison, till Jerusalem was taken—favoured by Nebuchadnezzar—dwelt in Judea—carried into Egypt.

THE history of the Jewish nation exhibits the conduct of divine Providence in a most instructive light. While we behold the Lord, with a parental care, " rejoicing over them to do them good," notwithstanding their perverse and rebellious spirit; we are convinced, that " He is gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy." But the terrors of his justice, also, were displayed towards that favoured people: for, when various means had been used in vain to humble and reform them, they were given up in righteous judgment to utter destruction. We learn, therefore, that He will at last avenge himself on those, who continue to trifle with

with his grace: and the weight of his vengeance is generally proportioned to their contempt and abuſe of his goodneſs.

Is it enquired, " Wherefore was the Lord wroth with his inheritance?" Their offences were numerous and complicated; but one ſin, above all others, brought on their ruin, and, as it were, "filled the meaſure of their iniquities:"——" They mocked the meſſengers of God, and deſpiſed his words, and miſuſed his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord aroſe againſt his people, till there was no remedy *." Thoſe holy men were raiſed up in ſucceſſion from age to age, to reprove them and call them to repentance; but their admonitions met with a marked abhorrence: " all the day long they ſtretched out their hands unto a diſobedient and gainſaying people." In the upright diſcharge of their office, " they had trial of cruel mockings and ſcourgings; yea, moreover, of bonds and impriſonment: they were ſtoned, they were ſawn aſunder, were tempted, were ſlain with the ſword †."

It were eaſy to produce particular inſtances: let the example of Jeremiah ſerve as a ſpecimen of the reſt. This was a character of peculiar eminence; and a larger account of him, than of the others, is left us in the book which bears his name, and which was doubtleſs compoſed by himſelf. We ſhall advert to ſome of the moſt remarkable circumſtances of his life and preaching; and, though a narrower inſpection into his writings would more clearly ſhew, that in him " the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant," our ſhort

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16. † Heb. xi. 36, 37.

detail

detail will exhibit him as a pattern of ministerial fidelity, courage, and assiduity, sweetly tempered with patience, meekness, and love. Such advocates for the truth of God are among the best blessings, which he can bestow on any people; but the rejection of them is a decided proof of a rooted enmity against Him, and will draw down his heaviest displeasure. May we fear for ourselves, and know the day of our visitation, that the Gospel, which we hear, may be to us "the savour of life unto life!"

Years before Christ, 629. Jeremiah was invested with the prophetical office at an early age, and is even said to have been sanctified and ordained to it before his birth *. He continued in the faithful execution of his duty, during the reigns of the five last kings of Judah, for the space of forty years, and for the greatest part of that time endured much bitterness of opposition. He was raised up as an assistant to the pious Josiah in the arduous work of reformation, and was then first appointed to the sacred charge, when that monarch began to purge the nation of its idolatries. "No man taketh this honour to himself:" the most eminent servants of God have been backward to accept it: nor do we read of any, but false prophets only, who thrust themselves, uncalled, into the ministerial function, or embraced it as an easy or lucrative employment. Jeremiah refused it, through a modest diffidence of himself, pleading his youth and want of eloquence: "Ah! Lord God," said he, "behold I cannot speak, for I am a child." His objections, however, were over-ruled by the gra-

* Jer. i. 5, &c.

cious declarations of God himſelf, who engaged to qualify him for his office, to ſupport and protect him in it. He ſaw in a viſion the deſolations, which were to be brought upon Judah by the Chaldeans; and he was required to warn both the princes and the people, that their abandoned conduct had provoked the Lord to deſtroy them. Such a meſſage could not but be moſt offenſive to them: accordingly, he was told that their utmoſt rage would be excited againſt him; and yet, though bonds and afflictions awaited him, that he ſhould be reſcued from all their furious aſſaults. Doubtleſs, the proſpect of his ſufferings occaſioned many painful feelings; but the ſtrongeſt courage and confidence became Him, to whom that promiſe was given, "They ſhall fight againſt thee, but they ſhall not prevail againſt thee; for I am with thee, ſaith the Lord, to deliver thee."

Immediately, he ſtood forth as a preacher of righteouſneſs, and ſeconded the king's attempts for the reſtoration of true religion, by the moſt ſolemn addreſſes to his countrymen on the evil and the danger of their ways. In that inſtance he had the civil authority on his ſide, which added weight to his exhortations, or at leaſt ſecured him from inſults. Indeed, from the united efforts of ſuch a prince and ſuch a prophet we ſhould have formed the moſt pleaſing expectations of ſucceſs. Yet the work of reformation advanced very ſlowly: and through that whole reign little more appears to have been effected than an external change. The people were reſtrained awhile from their groſs irregularities, but were ready to return to them again.

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The miniſters of Chriſt ſhould be thankful, when the power of the magiſtrate is extended to protect them from the fury of ſuch, as would oppoſe them. But the ſupport of government alone cannot render their labours efficacious. O that the divine influence may accompany their words; otherwiſe, though ſinners may be checked, they will not be converted!

Jeremiah, probably, met with no open perſecution, till the death of Joſiah. But from that period his ſituation was very different, and his whole hiſtory ſeemed to illuſtrate and exemplify God's original declaration to him: "They ſhall fight againſt thee, but they ſhall not prevail againſt thee; for I am with thee, ſaith the Lord, to deliver thee."

He had to contend with ſome malicious enemies in his native place, among the prieſts of Anathoth and his own kindred. They were ſo far provoked by his bold admonitions, as to determine in the moſt treacherous manner to deſtroy him. He, indeed, ſuſpected not their purpoſe; for he was like a lamb or an ox brought to the ſlaughter: but the Lord watched over him, and reſcued him out of their hands, by giving him timely information of their deſigns *. It uſually happens to thoſe who are zealous for religion, that their foes are of their own houſehold: and perhaps none are more likely to be offended by the pious labours of the faithful ambaſſadors for Chriſt, than thoſe teachers, who poſſeſs not the ſame fervency or diligence.

The prophet referred his cauſe to God, and then with renewed vigour, though forbidden to propheſy any

* Jer. xi. and xii.

more, reproved the men, who had intended to murder him, and denounced the heavy judgments of God againſt them. Yet it ſhould ſeem that he felt ſome diſcouragement from the late attempts upon his life, and complained to God with an appearance of impatience. But he was remanded to his work, and bidden to prepare for ſeverer trials *.

He went on, therefore, in the execution of his office, declaring the whole counſel of God, and, by a variety of ſignificant actions as well as alarming ſermons, warned the nation of their impending ruin. But after a time his conflict was ſo ſharp, through the bitterneſs and rage of that abandoned people, that his faith failed him, and he betrayed a peeviſhneſs of ſpirit in murmuring at his appointment to ſo hard a poſt †. We do not vindicate his expreſſions, for we allow that much imperfection remains in the beſt characters. Jeremiah was ſanctified from the womb; yet he felt the depravity of a fallen nature. For ſurely it was no other than unbelief and a petulant diſcontent, which led him to complain of the difficulties of his work. Alas! how prone we are to find fault, when we meet not with the ſucceſs which we expected! Do not our trials evince the weakneſs of our religious principles?

The Lord had compaſſion on his ſervant, and, while He required him to return to the faithful diſcharge of his duty, renewed the former promiſes of ſupport and protection. How gracious is our God, who bears with our infirmities, and is not provoked by our perverſeneſs utterly to deſert us!

* Jer. xii. 1—6. † xv. 10.

The prophet was again perplexed and almoſt confounded by the inſults, hardſhips, and dangers, to which his office expoſed him. He ſolemnly declared before the princes, the prieſts, and the people, that they would be given as a prey to the Chaldeans for their impenitence and obduracy. But his admonitions rendered him extremely offenſive, and raiſed up enemies againſt him on every ſide. They derided his meſſage, as if it were the fiction of his own brain, and conſulted how they might aſperſe his character, and even take away his life*. Paſhur, a prieſt and a principal miniſter in the temple, proceeded with much rage to beat and impriſon him †. On the very next day, indeed, Jeremiah was releaſed; and then, by expreſs revelation from the Lord, he predicted the captivity and miſerable death, which awaited his furious perſecutor. But ſuch a general and bitter oppoſition quite diſheartened him, and ſtirred up ſome wrong tempers within him. He relates, with a beautiful ſimplicity, the painful conflict which he ſuffered, the fears and diſcouragement he felt, and the hard thoughts he had entertained concerning God, though at times the confidence of his faith was unſhaken.

We mourn for the weakneſs of the man of God; but we know how to account for it. He is not chargeable with any open inconſiſtency or diſhonourable conduct in the execution of his office; but ſo ſtrong were his ſecret corruptions, that he found it extremely difficult to perſevere in it. We admire the humility and ingenuouſneſs, with which he has deſcribed the very

* Jer. xvii. 15. xviii. 18, 23. † xx. 1, &c.

ſinful emotions of his own mind. Alas! who among the ſaints of God, in circumſtances of violent temptation, has not experienced the ſame? Do they not all confeſs, "The evil, which we would not, that we do?" Even while their outward deportment before men is unexceptionable, they frequently diſcover the moſt deteſtable thoughts and principles working within them, which almoſt overwhelm them with diſtreſs, and deter them from approaching to God. At thoſe ſeaſons, however, the Lord is gracious in preventing their inward depravity from breaking forth into ſuch acts, as would "give great occaſion to their enemies to blaſpheme." Let them renew their application for pardon and ſtrength, and like Jeremiah proſecute with freſh vigour the duties of their calling.

From that period we hear no more of any impatience or wearineſs, though his difficulties were not in the leaſt diminiſhed. No ſufferings, no bitterneſs of perſecution diſcouraged him from making a bold and unreſerved declaration of the divine will. He reproved, he threatened, not in the ſpirit of anger or private reſentment, but as the meſſenger of Jehovah God of hoſts. Let us contemplate his zeal and fidelity, till we ourſelves be animated by the ſame holy ardour, and be willing to endure the ſevereſt trials "for conſcience towards God."

Years before Chriſt, 610. In the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, while he preached repentance to the people in the courts of the Lord's houſe, and foretold the deſtruction of the temple and city, as the puniſhment of their obduracy, he was violently ſeized by the prieſts and

and prophets, and dragged as a criminal before the tribunal of the princes*. There he ſtood undaunted, maintaining that he ſpoke only the words of God, and warning his very judges to take heed to themſelves. Nor was his meekneſs leſs conſpicuous than his courage. "As for me," ſaid he, "behold, I am in your hand: do with me, as ſeemeth good and meet unto you." The elders were inclined to favour him, and even pleaded his cauſe againſt his enraged accuſers. He was, therefore, honourably acquitted, chiefly indeed through the influence of one perſon, Ahikam, whom the Lord had made uſe of for the preſervation of the prophet. He eſcaped from their fury, but we apprehend that his liberty was abridged.

He experienced other deliverances equally aſtoniſhing, which are to be aſcribed to the gracious interpoſition of God. Some neceſſary hindrance, probably the ſtrict prohibition of the king and his counſellors, prevented him from repeating his admonitions in the temple. But, that another call might be given to that infatuated nation, Baruch was directed to ſupply his place, by reciting in the moſt public and numerous aſſembly the ſubſtance of Jeremiah's predictions and exhortations, which he had taken down from his mouth†. This awakened the attention of the princes, who immediately carried information to the palace. Jehoiakim required the book to be read before him; but the contents ſoon rouſed his indignation. He deſtroyed the writing, and commanded the prophet and his ſcribe to be ſeized, with an intent, doubtleſs, to deſtroy them.

* Jer. xxvi, 1, &c. † xxxvi. 1, &c.

But his mad purpose was defeated: for, being under the care and protection of Jehovah, they were in some way or other so effectually concealed, as to elude the search of the officers. Jeremiah's safety, then, in this instance was owing, not to his own vigilance or good management, not to the contrivance or interest of friends, but to the immediate and miraculous agency of God himself. "The Lord hid them."

He had narrowly escaped; yet he declined not the further execution of his office. By the divine direction he wrote down another copy of those very declarations, which had incensed the king, adding also the most awful denunciations against him for his late conduct, and then gave this fresh transcript to Baruch, probably to be published as before. This must have been done at the peril of their lives; but, as we hear of no other attempt against them, we conclude that the fury of the persecutor was restrained by the powerful influence of Heaven.

Years before Christ, 599. Jeremiah saw the threatened vengeance take place upon the impious prince and his son who succeeded; for they were both carried captives to Babylon, together with many of their subjects. That event, though it confirmed his words, was very afflictive to him. He felt the tenderest compassion for his exiled countrymen, and therefore sent to them by letter to comfort them in their bondage *. He entreated them not to give heed to seducing prophets, who encouraged them to expect a speedy deliverance; for he assured them from the Lord, that they must continue

* Jer. xxix. 1, &c.

ſeventy years in that ſtate of baniſhment. In the mean time he exhorted them to ſeek the peace and welfare of that city where they ſojourned, and to wait in faith and prayer for the completion of the divine promiſes.

He remained at Jeruſalem, and had the ſame painful taſk to perform as before. For, during the whole reign of Zedekiah, he was called to contend with that abandoned and infatuated king, with the falſe prophets alſo, with the prieſts and the nobles: nor could he look for any other recompence than ſtripes, impriſonment, and death. But he pleaded the cauſe of God, and in obedience to Him heſitated not to endure all things.

Zedekiah was placed in the government of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar, and compelled to ſwear allegiance to him *. To this oath Jeremiah exhorted him ſtrictly to conform, in oppoſition to all thoſe lying teachers, who with their pretended divinations encouraged him to throw off the yoke of ſubjection †. Thoſe deceivers, therefore, were enraged againſt the meſſenger of Jehovah; but he continued, notwithſtanding all their contempt and violence, to declare the will of Heaven. He maintained, that it would be vain as well as impious to reſiſt the Babyloniſh monarch, and that, upon their rebellion againſt him, they ſhould be given up to utter deſolation. Still Zedekiah liſtened to his flattering counſellors, and by his perfidy provoked Nebuchadnezzar to invade the land and beſiege the city.

Then, indeed, the king in his diſtreſs felt and teſtified a high reſpect for the prophet; for he ſent to en-

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 10—13. † Jer. xxvii. and xxviii.

treat

treat his interceſſion with the Lord*. Alas! how many wiſh for the prayers of good men, and yet reject their advice! Jeremiah could not go beyond the word of the Lord, and therefore, while he preached the neceſſity of unfeigned repentance, and of ſubmiſſion to the Chaldeans, he predicted the fatal effects of the preſent oppoſition†. But his admonitions were deſpiſed, or rather, they excited the utmoſt rage againſt him: for he was caſt into priſon, as a diſaffected and ſeditious perſon.

Do we commiſerate his opprobious confinement? Even there he enjoyed the comforts of the divine preſence, and received freſh communications from Heaven‡. As a proof of his full confidence, that the land would be reſtored to their deſcendants at the appointed period, he purchaſed a family eſtate, and gave directions for the preſervation of the writings concerning it. In anſwer to his fervent ſupplications, the Lord confirmed the former revelations made to him, declaring, that, though Jeruſalem ſhould be utterly deſtroyed for its wickedneſs, it ſhould be rebuilt and eſtabliſhed in a ſtate of great proſperity. He was alſo aſſured that the Redeemer ſhould yet ariſe from the ſeed of David, according to the promiſe, and that under His ſpiritual government the Church ſhould poſſeſs an enlargement, ſecurity, and happineſs, unknown before. Such a foreſight of the bleſſed times of the Goſpel would, doubtleſs, fill the mind of the prophet with "joy and peace in believing."

* Jer. xxi. 2. xxxvii. 3. † xxi. 3, &c. xxxiv. 1—7.
‡ xxxii. 1, &c. xxxiii. 1, &c.

A ſhort

A ſhort reſpite was granted to Jeruſalem; for the Chaldeans withdrew their forces to attack the Egyptians. In that interval Jeremiah was releaſed, but, when he perceived that both the king and the people ſtill hardened their hearts, and became even more obdurate through the delay of the threatened vengeance, he admoniſhed and reproved them with the ſame firmneſs and courage as before*. He maintained that Nebuchadnezzar would certainly return, renew the ſiege, and deſtroy the city. Upon the firſt aſſault, a reformation, in one inſtance, had taken place among them. By the command of Zedekiah, the ſlaves had been liberated from their oppreſſive ſervice, and their freedom confirmed to them by all the formalities of a ſolemn covenant before God†. But when the Chaldeans retired, the holy covenant was perfidiouſly violated, and the ſlaves reduced to their former ſubjection. Jeremiah, therefore, in God's name, repreſented to the princes their baſe treachery, and declared that for this, in addition to their other enormities, accumulated miſeries were coming upon them, and that an eſcape would be impoſſible. His plain dealing, doubtleſs, provoked their indignation; and an opportunity ſoon offered, which ſhewed their malevolence againſt him.

During the ceſſation of hoſtilities, whilſt he was permitted to be at large, he attempted to depart from Jeruſalem, and to ſeek a retreat in the country. Perhaps he was wearied out with that long, and as it ſhould ſeem fruitleſs, ſtruggle he had maintained againſt an abandoned people; and, amidſt the many diſtractions

* Jer. xxxvii 6, &c. † xxxiv. 8, &c.

likely

likely to ensue, he might wish for solitude and ease. But his scheme failed: for he was instantly seized by a guard, under a charge of deserting to the enemy, and, after being contumeliously beaten, was thrust into a dungeon, where he continued for some time, with extreme danger of his life.

At length his sufferings were mitigated. Zedekiah retained a reverence for him, and took him from his cell to consult him. He received from him no favourable answer, and yet he so far attended to his earnest expostulation on the injustice and severity of his confinement, as to appoint him to a less rigorous custody, and to command that he should be regularly supplied with provisions, while any remained in the city.

But his trials soon increased. Some of the elders of the people were violently enraged against him, on account of his preaching. They represented him, therefore, as a turbulent fellow, whose life should no longer be spared, and, through the weakness of the king, they obtained leave to wreak their vengeance upon him *. Immediately they let him down into a deep, miry dungeon, where he was on the point of perishing. But again he was rescued, through the unexpected mediation of Ebedmelech, an Ethiopian eunuch in the palace, and restored to his former more favourable imprisonment. Nor did that act of piety and kindness lose its reward: for God declared, that he would protect the man, who had loved and delivered his prophet †.

The prisoner was admitted to another conference with Zedekiah, nor was he backward to repeat his faithful

* Jer. xxxvii. 1, &c † xxxix. 15—18.

admonitions.

admonitions. But the prince continued impenitent, and Jeremiah wore his chains, till Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Chaldeans. Inconceivable distress, confusion, and carnage attended that event; but the arm of Jehovah was stretched out for the defence of his servant *. Even Nebuchadnezzar, the proud conqueror, gave express directions, that a peculiar regard should be shewn to Jeremiah, and full liberty allowed him to choose his abode.

Doubtless from a desire of usefulness, as well as an attachment to his country, he fixed his residence among the few people who were left in the land. But his pious labours did not succeed with them. They professed to reverence him, entreated his prayers, and solemnly promised obedience to his word †. Yet, when he charged them to continue in Judea, assuring them that God would prosper and bless them there, but threatening them with entire destruction if they should seek protection in Egypt, their hypocrisy appeared. In contempt of God and the prophet, they retreated to Egypt, and compelled Jeremiah to accompany them ‡. There likewise he persisted in reproving and warning them, foretelling also the approaching ruin of that very nation, to which they had fled for safety. Ah! what distress and horror must have filled his mind, while he was witness to their increasing obduracy and profligacy of manners! He could not be silent; yet no man regarded: and it has been thought, that he died at last as a martyr, and sealed his prophecies and doctrines with his blood.

* Jer. xxxix. 1—14. † xlii 1, &c. ‡ xliii. 1, &c.

How

How honourable was the character of the Lord's ſervant, in the midſt of all the indignities and violence which he ſuffered! How much inſtruction may we derive from the review of his conduct, and the various occurrences of his life! In whatever ſtation we are placed, we learn from him to conſult the will of God, and ſteadfaſtly to adhere to His commands, in oppoſition to the whole world, and in contempt of our own preſent conveniences and comfort. Our faith is confirmed, and our hope animated, while we obſerve the aſtoniſhing deliverances wrought for the perſecuted prophet: we are emboldened to reſt upon the promiſes of God, and to believe, that in a ſtrict attention to our duty "He will never leave us nor forſake us." If we are fixed in a private and retired department, the incidents we have met with may not ſeem ſo remarkable, as thoſe which befel Jeremiah; but the ſame gracious Providence has protected and ſupported us; and we alſo may look back with wonder and gratitude on the way, by which the Lord has led us. Has He not raiſed up friends for us, where we leaſt expected them, reſcued us from many formidable dangers, and ſuddenly removed from us thoſe heavy calamities under which we were ready to ſink? "He is faithful that promiſed." Let us not be backward to ſerve Him, nor ſhrink from the poſt, which He has aſſigned us, whatever difficulties or perils may await us in it. Let us confide in his care, and rejoice in his love. He will infallibly perform the engagements of his Covenant, and "perfect that which concerneth us."

So

So far the example before us may admit of a general application, for the instruction and encouragement of all who desire "to obey God rather than men." But it demands a more particular attention from those, who "minister in holy things," and who, like the prophets of old, appear in the public and important character of "ambassadors for God." Their commission, indeed, differs from Jeremiah's: but there are many points of resemblance, which may furnish them with profitable hints, for the regulation of their conduct. May God pour out his Spirit upon all the pastors of his Church, and endue them with a measure of the same wisdom, courage, fidelity, patience, and assiduity, which his ancient servant possessed!

You therefore, who are called to labour in the Gospel, should contemplate the life of Jeremiah with peculiar regard. Like him, you are required to declare many offensive truths, to reprove a sinful generation, and foretel "the wrath of God, which cometh upon the children of disobedience." Learn, then, to deliver your message without fear or partiality, and keep back nothing which God has enjoined. Your hearers may tempt you to "speak unto them smooth things," and to be silent on such subjects as excite their disgust. But would you corrupt the word of God, in order to suit their vitiated taste? If you thus pleased men, you would not be the servants of Christ *. Your difficulties may also be increased, if you have to address persons of rank and influence; for they may be disposed to consider your plain dealing as an indignity to them.

* Gal. i. 10.

But,

But, while you pay them all proper deference, do not hesitate, as occasion shall be given, to "reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine*." O betray not the cause of God, to conciliate their favour, or to secure your own interest and reputation!

It may likewise happen, that in the discharge of your office you may be opposed, and all your solemn declarations denied and ridiculed by false, though fashionable, teachers. Such was Jeremiah's trial: O learn from him, to combat their errors with firmness and courage, and to persevere in maintaining the truth, from a full confidence that God himself will vindicate the honour of his Gospel!

You will think yourselves bound to denounce "the terrors of the Lord" against impenitent offenders; but, like the prophet, you will also speak in words of consolation; and the promises of God will have their proper place and proportion in your preaching. His writings will instruct you to encourage returning sinners by assurances of complete forgiveness, and to exhibit the power and the grace of the great Redeemer, as "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." You will contemplate with delight his descriptions of the glory, amplitude, and blessedness of the kingdom of Jesus†, and earnestly entreat the people of your charge to bow with unfeigned subjection to this Prince of Peace. You perceive Jeremiah, in his darkest hours, rejoicing in those spiritual and exalted privileges, which are secured by the divine Covenant‡: nor will you fail to

* 2 Tim. iv. 2. † Jer. xxiii. 5, 6. ‡ xxxi. 33, 34. xxxii. 40.

exhort

exhort every trembling penitent to take hold of this Covenant, while you reprefent the unchangeable Jehovah, as engaging by his promife and his oath to beftow both prefent and everlafting falvation on all them that believe.

You will not look for the recompence of your labours from men: probably a faithful attention to your duty will procure you many enemies. Wonder not, at leaft, if you experience a meafure of that opprobrious and cruel treatment, which Jeremiah met with. The hand of violence may be reftrained, but the tongue of flander will vent its poifon againft you. Falfe and malicious reports may render your character infamous, and feem to obftruct the ufefulnefs of your miniftry. In fuch circumftances, you will have efpecial need to guard againft all improper affections; and the example before you will teach you to fuffer long and be kind. Forbearance, meeknefs, and love, even toward your bittereft perfecutors, will beft prove the excellence of your principles, as well as your own fincerity. You muft "not render evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwife bleffing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye fhould inherit a bleffing *."—"The fervant of the Lord muft not ftrive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meeknefs inftructing thofe that oppofe themfelves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth †."

Is it objected, that the holy prophet himfelf betrayed a petulant, and angry fpirit, and uttered fome tremen-

* 1 Pet. iii. 9. † 2 Tim. ii. 24, 25.

dous imprecations againſt his adverſaries*? No merely human character can be propoſed for our imitation in every inſtance. The imperfections of the ſaints, however, warn us to be circumſpect. But the caſe and office of Jeremiah were extraordinary: as a prophet, he might ſpeak many things, which would be unſuitable to others. Moſt of thoſe paſſages, which have the appearance of curſes, were no other than predictions of evil, or they expreſſed only his approbation of the judgments, which God had revealed to him†. It will not be ſaid, ſurely, that he was habitually moroſe and revengeful; for the whole tenour of his life would contradict it. Did he not labour with uncommon aſſiduity for the good of thoſe, who hated him? Did he not diſcover the moſt compaſſionate diſtreſs, on account of their miſeries: and pour out his heart in fervent prayer for thoſe, who were ſeeking to murder him‡?

Are you tempted to court the applauſe of men at the expence of truth, "to give flattering titles," and "have men's perſons in admiration becauſe of advantage?" This would be a mean, deteſtable conduct. Rather, rejoice "if ye be reproached for the name of Chriſt."—Or, would you conſult your eaſe, and live entirely to yourſelves, regardleſs of the ſolemn obligations of your office? How widely, then, do you differ from the prophet! And how much more honourable was he, in the midſt of ſtripes and impriſonment, than

* Jer. xvii. 18. xviii. 21—23.

† See the Character of David, Page 106.

‡ Jer. iv. 19. viii. 21. ix. 1. xiii. 17. xiv. 7. &c.

ſe

those flexible and compliant teachers among ourselves, who "are of the world," and who appear the foremost in every scheme of pleasure and sensual gratification!

Does the prospect of difficulties terrify you? Perhaps you magnify your dangers, or forget the promises of your God, who engages to support you. Need we remind you of the astonishing interpositions in Jeremiah's favour, or observe, that similar deliverances may be wrought for you? The Lord, whom you serve, may raise up friends for you, even among your enemies; may restrain the men of violence, and confound their purposes against you. He will himself visit you, when most insulted and oppressed; and, probably, He may induce contemptuous sinners to revere you, and to "make supplication unto you." It is not unusual, at least, in the present day, for the faithful ambassadors of Christ to be rescued and preserved, beyond their hopes: nor are we at a loss to account for this, while we hear their gracious Master assuring them, "Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world*."

Does your want of success discourage you? We wonder not, if in your haste you resolve to abandon that employment, which produces no visible good. But if you regard the authority of God, or love your fellow creatures, the word of God will be "in your heart as a burning fire shut up in your bones, and you will be weary with forbearing†." In obedience to God, and in patient expectation of his blessing, you must continue your labours, and leave the event to Him. Little

* Matt. xxviii. 20. † Jer. xx. 9.

advantage ſeemed to be derived from the inceſſant exertions of Jeremiah. Yet he was greatly honoured, and his reward was with his God. O be animated to purſue the grand object of your high calling with unremitting ardour; and, whatever you may loſe or ſuffer in ſuch a ſervice, the iſſue will be glorious to yourſelves! Let no dangers move you "neither count you your lives dear unto yourſelves, ſo that you may finiſh your courſe with joy, and the miniſtry, which you have received of the Lord Jeſus, to teſtify the Goſpel of the grace of God *." Then ſhall you join with "the goodly fellowſhip of the prophets, and the noble army of martyrs," in ſinging praiſe to Him, "who giveth you the victory;" and you ſhall ſhine among thoſe, who have turned many to righteouſneſs "as the brightneſs of the firmament, and as the ſtars for ever and ever †." Amen.

* Acts xx. 24. † Dan. xii. 3.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR.

CHAP. XV.

Nebuchadnezzar ſucceeded to, and enlarged, his father's dominions—his magnificence, pride, and oppreſſion—had a revelation of the kingdom of Chriſt—ſet up an immenſe idol—his conduct to the three pious Jews—warned of God in a dream—yet lifted up—depoſed from his government—reſtored and changed—praiſed God.

We are taught by the ſacred hiſtory to acknowledge the controlling influence, or immediate agency, of a righteous, wiſe, and Almighty Governor, in every event of human life. Whilſt, therefore, the moſt tremendous commotions are excited amongſt men, and kingdoms paſs from one poſſeſſor to another, we are to conſider His hand as ſuſtaining and directing the whole, ſo that in the higheſt ſenſe "He doeth according to his will, in the army of heaven and amongſt the inhabitants of the earth." How little is this believed or regarded! An atheiſtical notion of ſome unknown, blind principle, chance, or nature, has almoſt excluded the divine Providence from the management of the univerſe. But the preſent narrative will furniſh us with a ſtriking proof and illuſtration of that important truth, "God is the Judge: He putteth down one, and ſetteth up another*."

* Pſal. lxxv. 7.

We have here ſelected, for the ſubject of our ſerious meditation, a remarkable character out of the Pagan world, Nebuchadnezzar the haughty tyrant of Babylon. But we ſhall confine our attention to thoſe circumſtances of his life, which are recorded in the ſcriptures, and are evidently written for our admonition. He was a bold, preſumptuous offender, and ſeems, in ſome reſpects like Pharaoh, to have maintained a conteſt with the God of Heaven, till at length he was overcome and confounded. How many teſtimonies we have, that "God reſiſteth the proud," and that "whoſoever exalteth himſelf ſhall be abaſed*!"

Years before Chriſt, 604. Nebuchadnezzar has been celebrated as one of the moſt illuſtrious monarchs, and as a prudent, brave, and ſucceſsful warrior. He came to the throne of Babylon at an early age; and to the extenſive dominions, which he inherited from his father, he made a large addition by his own perſonal exploits; inſomuch that the greateſt part of the then known world was tributary to him. "All people, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him: whom he would, he ſlew; and whom he would, he kept alive; and whom he would, he ſet up; and whom he would, he put down †."

The limits of our plan will not permit us to follow him from one conqueſt to another. Suffice it to obſerve, This is he, who brought the kings of Judah into ſubjection, and led away the whole nation in a ſtate of captivity to Babylon. He attacked and ſubdued

* Ja. iv. 6. Luke xiv. 11. † Dan. v. 19.

Jehoiakim,

Jehoiakim, according to Jeremiah's predictions, robbed him of his treasures, then left him as his vassal, and afterwards, upon his revolt, vanquished and destroyed him *. He also deposed the young ruler Jehoiachin, and took him to Babylon, after ransacking the city and temple of Jerusalem. He had appointed Zedekiah to the government; but, upon his violating the oath of allegiance, he came against him with numerous forces, invested, reduced, and laid waste Jerusalem, and burnt down its palaces and the house of God †. He apprehended the faithless prince, and, after murdering his sons before him, put out his eyes, and led him in chains to grace his triumph. Thus he made and unmade kings, to gratify his own ambition, resentment, or caprice.

His magnificence and splendour were equal to his power and tyranny. Babylon, the place of his residence, the seat of empire, was the wonder of the world. Its extent, and the grandeur of its buildings, its temples, the height and thickness of its walls, its royal edifices and gardens, which were all improved if not raised by Nebuchadnezzar, have been the admiration of ages ‡. Thus, he had reached the summit of human greatness; and if riches, pomp, and dominion could possibly bestow happiness, he would have been the most favoured of his species. But withhold your judgment, till you hear the sequel of this narration; and do not hastily pronounce, that the man of wealth and honour enjoys the largest share of felicity.

* 2 Kings xxiv. 1, &c. † xxv. 1, &c.

‡ See Bp. Lowth on Isa. xiii. 19.

Is it enquired, why there is ſuch a difference between one individual and another; or by what means the Babylonian monarch attained ſo high an exaltation? An uninſpired hiſtorian would direct our attention to the wiſdom of his counſels, the firmneſs of his generals, the valour of his ſoldiers, or his own uncommon fortitude. But the ſacred writers diſcover to us an inviſible Agent appointing and controlling the ſtrange events of Nebuchadnezzar's life, and aſcribe all the ſucceſs of his arms, and his enlarged dominion, to the divine ſuperintendency. In their account this mighty tyrant was but an inſtrument in the hands of Jehovah, a ſervant, whom He ſent out with a particular commiſſion; and whom He aſſiſted to accompliſh the purpoſe of it. The prophets Iſaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel teach us, that God had determined to puniſh the offences of his people by the inſolence and oppreſſion of the Chaldean, and that for this very end he was ſuffered to go on and proſper*.

How vaſt and glorious is the government of God, who faſhioneth the very hearts of men, and over-rules their ſinful principles and paſſions, ſo as to render them ſubſervient to his own deſigns! They may imagine, that all things are at their diſpoſal: and doubtleſs they pleaſe and gratify themſelves; for they do not act by conſtraint. On this very ground, they are afterwards chaſtiſed for thoſe vile affections, by which they were influenced even in fulfilling the divine will. The oppoſers and murderers of Chriſt did that, which the hand and counſel of the Lord determined before to be done,

* See 2 Kings xxiv. 2, 3. Jer. xxv. 8—12. xxvii. 6. xliii. 10.

and

and yet they were chargeable with the moſt heinous guilt*. Thus it is, as David inſtructs us, that the wicked are the ſword of Jehovah†; and when He gives it a commiſſion, no wonder if it devour and lay waſte. We ſhould, therefore, envy no man the greatneſs, to which he is exalted: for this is not a mark of any moral excellence in him, or of the favour of Heaven toward him. He may be intended by Providence to accompliſh ſome important event; but perhaps that grandeur, we admire, may be his heavieſt curſe.

There is a proneneſs in human nature to ſwell with arrogance, on account of any ſuperior attainments or diſtinctions. We ſhall, therefore, very rarely meet with a rich perſon, who is "made low‡." Such indeed are the ſnares of riches, that their poſſeſſors "ſhall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven§." Power and ſplendour, alſo, not leſs than wealth, draw forth and ſtrengthen the corruptions of the heart. We are not ſurpriſed, then, that Nebuchadnezzar, who had riſen to ſuch an elevation above his ſpecies, and ſeemed to have brought almoſt the whole known world into ſubjection to himſelf, was of an infamous character, proud, cruel, and oppreſſive, an obſtinate perſecutor of the church, and ſo enormous a ſinner, as to contend againſt Jehovah himſelf. There were inſtances, in which he paid a particular regard to the faithful ſervants of God: for when Jeruſalem was deſolated, he ſhewed favour to Jeremiah; and Daniel he preferred to be his prime miniſter of ſtate at Babylon.

* Acts ii. 23. iv. 28. † Pſalm xvii. 13.
‡ Ja. i. 10. § Matt. xix. 23.

lon. But his kindneſs in theſe caſes is to be aſcribed to the conſtraining influence of God, rather than to any goodneſs of diſpoſition in him. He muſt have had opportunities of being inſtructed in the true religion by the people and the prophets of the Lord, whom he had carried into captivity; and there were ſeaſons, when he ſeemed to feel very ſerious and ſtrong convictions; yet he continued for the greateſt part of his long reign, a period of forty-three years, to deſpiſe and provoke God more and more.

Not ſatisfied with plundering and deſtroying the houſe of God at Jeruſalem, he took away the holy veſſels, as it were in triumph, to Babylon, and placed them in the temples of his idols. It is probable, that many blaſphemous ſpeeches were uttered on that occaſion, and that the Pagan Deities were repreſented as overcoming the God of Iſrael. We mention not his cruelties and oppreſſion, when he reduced Jeruſalem, nor the vile indignities put upon the royal offspring, whom he made eunuchs, that they might ſerve him in his own palace *. But we are amazed, that to a perſon of ſuch a character a divine revelation was vouchſafed in the viſions of the night, predicting the eſtabliſhment of the kingdom of Chriſt, upon the ruins of the other great empires of the world †. He, indeed, neither underſtood the meaning, nor ſo much as recollected the dream; and in the madneſs of his rage he was about to ſlay his numerous magicians, becauſe they could not diſcover it. But when Daniel declared the ſecret, the fury of the tyrant ſubſided, and a ſudden

* Dan. i. 1, &c. † ii. 1, &c.

alteration took place. He, who had been wont to receive homage even from the kings of the earth, fell down with ſupreme veneration before Daniel, and confeſſed that Jehovah, whom the prophet worſhipped, was the God of gods and Lord of lords. From ſuch appearances we might have expected an entire change of conduct, a ſerious and uniform attention to the ſervice of the true God. But alas! how frequently are good impreſſions utterly effaced! Many may profeſs a high eſteem for the miniſters of religion, and yet never really comply with their exhortations. Many may cry out, from a full conviction, "The Lord, He is the God," and yet perſiſt in a ſtate of rebellion againſt Him.

Nebuchadnezzar remained an idolater, and ſeemed determined to exceed all others in his ſuperſtitions. He ſet up an object, of his own contrivance, for univerſal adoration, probably with a view to diſplay his ſuperior greatneſs, and to perpetuate his name*. He erected an immenſe image of gold, perhaps unequalled for ſize and magnificence, to the ſolemn dedication of which he ſummoned the nobles and officers throughout the whole empire, and required them to worſhip it, on pain of an excruciating death. What madneſs and impiety was this; eſpecially after his declarations of regard to Jehovah, the God of Iſrael! There were found, however, three faithful men, Shadrach, Meſhach, and Abed-nego, who dared to reſiſt the king's commandment, and boldly hazarded their lives in their attachment to the true God. They were arraigned

* Dan. iii. 1, &c.

and

and accused before him; and, while he threatened them with "the fiery furnace," he added, in a presumptuous tone, "Who is that God, that shall deliver you out of my hands?"

Here, it should seem, he set himself up as competent to maintain the contest with Jehovah. But did not their magnanimous confession, their pious fortitude, and the firmness of their faith, at least restrain and confound him? Alas! No: having given the challenge, he was determined to carry on the sad conflict, that his own dignity might not be lowered. With the utmost violence of rage and fury he commanded the place of their torment to be prepared with peculiar care; and to increase the terror of their punishment, he appointed the strongest of his soldiers to bind them, and to cast them into the furnace. But how mortifying was the event to the pride of this mighty potentate! His own officers were instantly consumed, and he himself beheld the servants of God walking with safety and composure in the midst of the flames. At length, then, he appeared to submit, blessed God for having prevented the effects of his impious decree, issued out another edict, denouncing the heaviest penalties on those who should oppose the true God, and promoted to honour those whom he meant to have destroyed. The whole of this transaction tended to display the perfections of Jehovah, and to call the attention of these idolaters to Him. It secured, at least, protection and support to the spiritual Israelites in that Pagan country. But ah! what a black picture does it exhibit of human wickedness in the person of Nebuchadnezzar!

Was

Was there not, then, an entire change in his temper and conduct from that period? Far otherwise: his convictions might be strong, but they produced no real penitence. They might restrain him from persecution, and dispose him to venerate the faithful servants of God; but they left him under the power of his former vile affections. Still "his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride *." In that awful state he lived for many years; till at length he was warned in a dream, as it were by a voice from Heaven, that a tremendous judgment was coming upon him †. Daniel interpreted the vision, declared that he should soon be reduced from his elevated rank to the most consummate wretchedness, and exhorted him, therefore, if he wished the sentence to be delayed, to break off his sins, and turn to God in righteousness.

So pointed an admonition, we should suppose, must have had some effect. Did the proud sinner, then, humble himself in the dust, or make supplication to his Judge? Alas! no external means, neither counsel, reproof, nor threatening, will excite one good disposition, till God himself implant it in the heart. At the end of twelve months, the king gave full proof, that the whole of his late dream, and the consequent instructions delivered to him by the prophet, had been entirely forgotten, and that he still continued to exalt himself against Jehovah. He surveyed the splendour of his palace, the strength and opulence of his capital, and the extent of his dominion; and then, as if he accounted himself a god, and demanded the adoration

* Dan. v. 20. † Dan. iv. 1, &c.

ration of others, he uttered that arrogant, atheiſtical ſpeech, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the houſe of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majeſty?"

The very ſound of the impious words may juſtly ſtrike us with horror. What, then, do we conclude from the character of this Babylonian monarch? Do we not perceive and confeſs the extreme depravity of our nature? Such inſtances of preſumptuous offenders have been permitted, in order to ſhew whither our hearts would lead us, and what we alſo are capable of perpetrating. All men, indeed, cannot ſin as Nebuchadnezzar did, becauſe they have not the ſame opportunities. We may thank God, that we are placed in a lower ſituation, more favourable to the purpoſes of religion. It will be well, if we know and improve our own mercies. But are we not under the influence of the very principle, which we condemn in this hiſtory? Are we not exalted in our own eſteem? Though we poſſeſs not the wealth or magnificence of a Chaldean prince, is there nothing of which we are proud and conceited, as if it conferred a peculiar excellence upon us? Are we not elated on account of our fortune, houſes, furniture, equipage, or dreſs? Do we not aſſume great merit to ourſelves, and demand reſpect from all around us, for our pedigree, our bodily ſtrength, or mental powers, for our knowledge, or, what is ſtill more prepoſterous, for our piety? We do not, as we ought, make God our all; we do not aſcribe all to Him, or uſe all for Him: and as far as we

we ſet up ourſelves, we take his place, and rob Him of his glory.

How long have we refuſed to humble ourſelves before Jehovah! Have we not, like Nebuchadnezzar, reſiſted convictions; and determined to pleaſe ourſelves, whatever the conſequence may be? Then we are accumulating a ſad load of guilt: and what will the end be? What, but confuſion, if not final deſtruction to ourſelves? For "Jehovah God of hoſts will be exalted in judgment." Be afraid, then, of ſtriving with your Maker; immediately drop the vain conteſt: "Be ye reconciled to God."

Years before Chriſt, 570. We admire the divine forbearance towards the tyrant of Babylon, and wonder that ſo daring an offender ſhould be ſuffered to live and triumph ſo long. But the time of juſtice came: the haughty ſinner was ſuddenly ſtopped in his career, and exhibited before the whole world, as a public example of the ſinfulneſs and danger of pride. At the very moment, when he vaunted himſelf in his pomp and glory, he heard a voice from heaven, declaring, that he ſhould be depoſed from his kingdom, excluded from all human ſociety, and ranked among the beaſts of the fields, for ſeven years, till he ſhould be fully convinced of the abſolute and righteous ſovereignty of the Lord God omnipotent. This event had been expreſsly predicted by Daniel's interpretation of his dream, only twelve months before. But the warning had been deſpiſed; and now the threatened ſentence was inſtantly carried into effect: nor could it be doubted, from the previous intimations given, that it was the appointment

ment of God himſelf. It is apprehended, that he fell into a ſtate of horrid diſtraction and madneſs, that his nobles drove him from the government, and that he continued to live at large, after a ſavage and brutal manner, during the whole of the period foretold. What an humbling ſtroke was this! What an inſtructive "ſpectacle unto the world, to angels, and to men!"

Of all other afflictions, which are the lot of humanity, none is more deplorable than inſanity. And who ſhall ſay, that he is ſecure from that malady? In this view, how little does man, with all his boaſted attainments, appear! For in one moment, all his ſtore of learning may be deſtroyed, his very ideas wiped away as if they had never been, his beloved poſſeſſions rendered uſeleſs or diſguſting, and he, who is ſtiled the lord of the creation, degraded even below the beaſts. O let us remember, "in whoſe hand our breath is, and whoſe are all our ways!"

Now indeed might the taunting ſpeech be taken up againſt the king of Babylon, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, ſon of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didſt weaken the nations! For thou haſt ſaid in thine heart, I will aſcend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the ſtars of God, I will ſit alſo upon the mount of the congregation, in the ſides of the north: I will aſcend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the moſt high. Yet thou ſhalt be brought down to hell, to the ſides of the pit*."

* Iſa. xiv. 12—15.

Shall

Shall we not fear for ourselves, and bow before God? O tremble, you sinners, who are at ease! However gay and prosperous you may be; to-morrow, to-day you may be reduced as low as Nebuchadnezzar. The Lord God, indeed, does not always execute judgment in so remarkable a manner. But will you presume upon his patience? Even though you should be suffered to go down to your grave in peace, you will not therefore escape. Has He no terrors in reserve, beyond the present life? O Sirs, a more tremendous sentence, than what Nebuchadnezzar experienced, awaits the impenitent in a future world. Soon will it be said, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels*."

Years before Christ, 563. But we leave not the Chaldean monarch in his wretched state of exile and ferocity. Behold then, in this instance, the goodness as well as the severity of God! After seven years, for so it had been foretold, he recovered the full exercise of his reason, the possession of his government, and all his former magnificence. But, though this alteration was astonishing, one still more remarkable took place; the moral character of the man appeared to be changed. Upon the restoration of his understanding, he manifested very different dispositions of mind. He had learned, in a painful manner, the universal and uncontrollable sovereignty of Jehovah; and therefore he bowed before Him with strong marks of humiliation

* Matt. xxv. 41.

and obedience. He bleſſed, and praiſed, and honoured the moſt High, and confeſſed the deſign and the juſtice of his late awful viſitation. For the conviction of others, too, he publiſhed his caſe to the whole world, (the narration being delivered in his own words) and ſolemnly called upon all perſons to admire, reverence, and ſerve the true God, whoſe dominion reaches throughout all ages, and extends to every inhabitant both of heaven and earth.

The hiſtory before us is full of wonders: we do not attempt to ſolve the difficulties, which might be raiſed concerning it. We preſume not to decide upon the real character and final ſtate of Nebuchadnezzar. Doubtleſs, a powerful influence had been exerted in ſubduing the proud and rebellious oppoſition of his heart againſt God: but it may be queſtioned, whether the change was univerſal and abiding. At leaſt, we know that many a haughty ſinner has been ſo intimidated or ſoftened by extreme ſuffering, as to make public confeſſions of his guilt, and to recommend the religion he had before perſecuted, who yet never became a true convert. Let us ſuſpect and try ourſelves: and while we allow, that it is not enough to reform the life from groſs iniquities, let us pray, that we may poſſeſs "the power of godlineſs."

But, though caution be neceſſary, we are inclined to admit the king of Babylon into the liſt of true penitents. We dare not deny the mercy of God to the moſt preſumptuous offenders; and in the preſent inſtance, it muſt be acknowledged, there were many very favourable appearances, and ſuch effects as are

ufually thought the genuine fruits of repentance. On this charitable fuppofition, we are conftrained to cry out, " Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" We admire and praife the riches of that grace, which can fubdue and pardon fo obdurate a finner. We adore the condefcenfion of that glorious Perfonage, who is " the repairer of the breach," and has opened, for thofe who have been moft abandoned, a way of accefs to God through his own blood. Let thofe, " who have received the atonement," ftand forward, as Nebuchadnezzar, to confefs their obligations, and invite others to join with them, in giving all bleffing and honour unto Him, who has done fo great things for them! They can tell, from what a depth of guilt and mifery He has redeemed them, and they will number amongft their moft valuable mercies thofe painful difpenfations, which tended to abafe their pride, and to produce in them " the obedience of faith."

But is there no caufe of terror to the carelefs? Or, becaufe the grace of God is fo free and extenfive, do all therefore obtain forgivenefs? Far otherwife. Many alas! die, as they live, in utter hardnefs and impenitence of heart; and in all fuch cafes the Gofpel itfelf forbids us to hope. O fubmit to your rightful Lord! Take hold of his Covenant, and fo make peace with Him. For " wo is unto him, who ftriveth with his Maker."

SHADRACH, MESHACH,

AND

ABEDNEGO.

CHAP. XVI.

Shadrach, Meſhach, and Abednego, deſcendants of David —their ſituation at Babylon—promoted—refuſed to worſhip Nebuchadnezzar's idol—accuſed before him—caſt into the furnace of fire—delivered, and reſtored to honour.

WE have ſeen the whole nation of the Jews reduced to a ſtate of extreme diſtreſs, a large part of them carried captives to a diſtant land, deprived of their government and religion, ſubjected to an idolatrous people, and treated with the utmoſt contempt and cruelty. This was an awful diſpenſation: and yet ſome important, wiſe, and gracious purpoſes were effected by it. It was intended as a ſevere chaſtiſement to them for their wickedneſs, and as the means of purging them from thoſe profane and Pagan practices, which obtained among them. By their diſperſion it was alſo deſigned to diffuſe among the Gentiles the knowledge of divine revelation, (for they took their ſcriptures with them to remote nations,) and thus to prepare the way for

for Messiah, the great Deliverer, by raising a general expectation of Him through the world *.

It pleased God, therefore, for the support of his own cause, to preserve "a holy seed," even at Babylon, and to make them conspicuous in the midst of their enemies. Many of the most excellent character were there called forth to public view; and they gave an open and bold attestation of the true religion. Their situation, indeed, was in many respects unfavourable to the advancement or the profession of piety, surrounded as they were with opposers and persecutors. But the God, whom they served, upheld and strengthened them, and by them wrought wonders among the Heathen, for his own name's sake. We have now before us the history of three persons, of this very description, signally honoured of God for their adherence to Him; and their case will confirm our observations.

Years before Christ, 607.

It should seem that they were of the seed royal, the descendants of David, and were carried into captivity at an early age †. When the proud conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, had reduced them to the infamous situation of eunuchs (agreeable to the divine denunciation for the iniquity of their fathers) these young men, together with Daniel, were chosen from the rest, as remarkable for their beauteous form and quick understanding, that they might attend upon the king. They were the intimate friends and companions of Daniel; and, being attached to him as well as to each other by the firmest principles of religion,

* Edward's Hist. of Redemp. Per. 1. part 6. † Dan. i. 3, &c.

they acted in concert together, and thus proved a mutual ſupport and comfort. With him they abſtained from their pleaſant food, out of a pure conſcientious motive, that they might not be defiled with the cuſtoms of the Heathens; and God gave them ſuch a degree of wiſdom, that they far excelled the wiſeſt of the Chaldean Magi.——When they, and all the aſtrologers, were threatened with death by the haughty tyrant, becauſe they could not declare the dream, which he had forgotten, upon their joining in fervent prayer with Daniel the ſecret was revealed, and, through Daniel's interceſſion, they were preferred to an honourable poſt in the government of Babylon *.

The account of their lives is ſhort: only one other tranſaction, in which they are concerned, is recorded; but this is accompanied with circumſtances ſo remarkable and affecting, and is related with ſuch a beautiful ſimplicity, that it muſt ſtrike the attention of every reader. We ſhall find it replete with ſerious and important inſtruction: for we may learn from it to glorify God in tribulation, and through faith in Him to meet the moſt enraged enemies with compoſure and confidence, deſiring only, that He may be magnified in us, whether by life or by death †.

We do not wonder, that they became the objects of envy and perſecution, as well for their high dignity, to which as foreigners and captives they could have no pretenſions, as for their public profeſſion of a ſtrange religion, and their very exemplary conduct. The hatred

* Dan. ii. 17, &c. † Phil. i. 20.

and oppoſition of the Great brought them into the moſt perilous and diſtreſsful ſituation: yet if we take a view of their ſpirit and behaviour at that ſeaſon, we cannot but be filled with a holy admiration and delight. The ſincerity and ſtrength of their principles were put to a ſevere trial. For, when Nebuchadnezzar had erected an immenſe idol, an image of gold, to which he commanded all the chief perſons in his kingdom to bow down, on pain of a tremendous and immediate death, Shadrach, Meſhach, and Abednego refuſed to comply *. All others fell down and worſhipped: but theſe men feared the God of Heaven, and would acknowledge no deity beſides. They were inſtantly accuſed and arraigned before the prince, as guilty of extreme ingratitude, contempt, and rebellion againſt him, and the threatened puniſhment was called for, that they ſhould be caſt into the burning fiery furnace.

We do not hear that any charge was preferred againſt Daniel on that occaſion; yet it cannot be ſuppoſed, that he obeyed the injunction, or diſowned his religion. He might be abſent on buſineſs of the ſtate; or his enemies might be afraid to make their firſt attack upon him, as he poſſeſſed ſuch extenſive power and influence; and they might expect the more eaſily to accompliſh his overthrow, after they had ſucceeded againſt his aſſociates.

The three pious Jews, therefore, ſtood before the enraged monarch to anſwer for their conduct, which he conſidered as highly inſulting to himſelf. He con-

* Dan. iii. 1, &c.

defcended, however, to give them another trial, and yet expreffed his firm determination, that, in cafe of their continued difobedience, they fhould feel his fevereft vengeance, and defied even the Almighty God to ref- cue them out of his hands.

Do we not allow their fituation to have been moft difficult? For how many reafons, befides a regard to their own emolument and the love of life, might induce them to comply with the king's demands? We appre- hend, that the temporizing worldlings of the prefent day would have been at no lofs to furnifh arguments for their ready fubmiffion. It might be pleaded, that the finfulnefs of the action enjoined was dubious, as they were not required to renounce their religion, or to pro- fefs any belief in the idol, but only to bow down amidft an immenfe multitude, which might be done with a fe- cret referve of the mind. Or, if criminal, it would be only a fingle offence, for which they might repent and be forgiven. It might alfo be fuggefted, that being captives they were not at their own difpofal, and that, as they were fubjected to the will of a tyrant, he and not they muft anfwer for the guilt. Befides, their difobedience to the edict might be conftrued as bafe ingratitude to their benefactor, who had raifed them to a ftate of high dignity. And why fhould they be fo precife and fingular, as obftinately to refufe, what others acceded to without fcruple, and what even many of their countrymen had practifed in Judea? Perhaps too, fome would have thought it allowable and expe- dient to give way in this inftance, fince they might thereby have promoted the good of the church, as well

as

as their own ſafety, while they retained a ſituation of ſuch extenſive uſefulneſs. We obſerve, at leaſt, how eaſy it is to multiply arguments in juſtification of a conformity to the world, and if we begin to heſitate, or conſult with fleſh and blood, in a time of temptation, we ſhall probably reſolve to comply.

Did Shadrach, then, and his companions ſtagger in their minds, or even feel a difficulty to determine on their conduct? No: every conſideration was baniſhed, but the regard which they owed to God. Without attending to their own intereſt or preſervation; without endeavouring by any ſubtilties to evade or explain away the guilt of ſinful conceſſions; without ſeeking to avert the king's diſpleaſure by mean artifices or perſuaſions, they declared their unalterable purpoſe to hazard every conſequence, in a ſteadfaſt adherence to the worſhip of Jehovah. They replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to anſwer thee in this matter. If it be ſo, our God whom we ſerve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not ſerve thy gods, nor worſhip the golden image which thou haſt ſet up."—We are ſtruck with admiration at their compoſure of mind*. They diſcovered no dread of

* Never was the obſervation of the Poet better exemplified, than in the inſtance before us,

"Juſtum, ac tenacem propoſiti virum,
Non civium ardor prava jubentium,
Non vultus inſtantis tyranni,
Mente quatit ſolida."—HORACE.

the

the threatening tyrant; they ſhuddered not at death in its moſt frightful forms. They ſaid, " we are not careful to anſwer thee:" we feel no terror, nor are we ſhaken in our principles by thy ſevereſt menaces. This indeed is ſufficiently accounted for by the ſtrength of their faith in God. They expreſſed the firmeſt dependence on Him for ſupport and deliverance, as his ſervants maintaining his cauſe; they confided in his truth and mercy towards them, and on that ground expected that He would not permit them to be confounded. " If it be ſo, our God whom we ſerve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king." Thus they gave a noble teſtimony of their ſupreme regard to the God of Iſrael, and of their willingneſs to endure every hardſhip for his ſake. It is not certain, that they had any intimations of God's deſign to reſcue them: they knew indeed what He could do, and what in other caſes He had done; but having found a reality and excellence in religion, worth ſuffering for, they reſolved, with an aſtoniſhing firmneſs, not to ſhrink from it, whatever it might coſt them: " Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not ſerve thy gods, nor worſhip the golden image which thou haſt ſet up."

This is an illuſtrious example of that faith, which " endures as ſeeing Him who is inviſible*." Let us pauſe awhile, and indulge our meditations, that we may be ſuitably affected with the hiſtory. Does it not ſpeak to us with an irreſiſtible energy, and evince the neceſſity of being eſtabliſhed in religious principles?

* Heb. xi. 27.

Though

Though we do not live at a Babylonian court, we are ſurrounded with thoſe, who are enemies to God. An image of gold may not be ſet up as the object of public worſhip; but ſomething or other, that the world will offer, will ſoon put us to the trial, and determine, whom we ſerve. Young people, eſpecially, are expoſed to various temptations, from which nothing can certainly ſecure them, but the fear of God and a ſteadfaſt belief of his truth. We wonder not, then, that the chief part of thoſe in the preſent day are content to ſwim down the ſtream, and are carried away by the corrupt faſhions of the age. For what ſhould induce them to reſiſt, to " come out, and be ſeparate?" Their minds are not furniſhed with the knowledge of divine things, and, from the want of pious inſtructions, their conſciences feel little or no ſenſe of evil: and therefore they are left without any effectual reſtraint. What a lamentable proſpect does this give us of the riſing generation! We call upon you, parents, " Bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Fortify them againſt thoſe aſſaults, to which they muſt be expoſed, and implant in them ſuch principles, as will make them " valiant for the truth."

The example, we are contemplating, will ſurely excite in us a holy fervour and courage for the defence of our religion. If, indeed, it be not worth contending for, it were abſurd to incur reproach and oppoſition on account of it: but if it be the moſt important concern, as it doubtleſs is, every other conſideration ſhould be ſacrificed to it. Where, then, is your eſteem for the Goſpel of Chriſt? You know not its value, nor are

you

you attached to its intereſt, if you are eaſily led away by the enticements of an evil world. If you are afraid or aſhamed to maintain the profeſſion and the practice of it, againſt the infidel and the ſenſualiſt, if you yield to their ſolicitations, we cannot ſo properly ſay, that you renounce your principles, as that you have no good principles at all. Perhaps thoſe are leſs dangerous enemies to Chriſtianity, who reject the whole, than thoſe who in private pretend the higheſt regard for it, and dare not openly avow it. Talk not of the prudence or expedience of temporizing, as if you could increaſe your uſefulneſs by an occaſional compliance. According to your plan, "the noble army of martyrs" acted a fooliſh part, and it would have been better for the Church if they had ſpared their blood. But, ſurely, God will be more honoured by your ſteadfaſt adherence to his cauſe, than by your cowardly deſertion of it. What, though you are under obligations to thoſe, who wiſh to gain you over to their notions or cuſtoms? Endeavour to convince them, that you are not unmindful of their kindneſs, but that you owe more to God, than to them. Appeal to the reaſon of thoſe, who would ſeduce you, "Whether it be right in the ſight of God, to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye*." Let no conſequences terrify you. Is ſhame, poverty, impriſonment, or even "the burning fiery furnace" more to be dreaded, than the frowns and fierce indignation of a juſt and omnipotent God? No: "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do;

* Acts iv. 19.

but

but fear Him, who, after he hath killed, hath power to caſt into hell*."

We might have thought that the bold confeſſion of theſe pious Hebrews, and their readineſs to ſuffer for the honour of Jehovah, would have changed the king's word, and reminded him of his former convictions†. But he was the more exaſperated; and the Lord permitted his pride and rage to break forth with the utmoſt violence, on purpoſe to ſhew how weak and contemptible this furious adverſary was, and to diſplay his own mighty power, which wrought effectually in ſupporting his oppreſſed ſervants. While Nebuchadnezzar, therefore, was tranſported to an inconceivable degree of madneſs, and the furnace was heated ſeven times more than uſual, theſe holy men preſerved their compoſure, nor once ſhrunk from their reſolution. The flames, which were ſo fierce as inſtantly to conſume their executioners, had no terror to them. They yielded their bodies to matyrdom, and, "for conſcience towards God," went down undiſmayed into the midſt of the fire.

A glorious company, in different ages of the church, have followed their example; nor has the Goſpel had a ſtronger confirmation of its truth and importance than the patience, courage, and exultation of thoſe, who have dared to die in its defence. The force of this argument has been felt; and therefore "the blood of the martyrs" has been called "the ſeed of the Church," from which a large increaſe has been produced. To men of worldly views, indeed, thoſe, who ſuffer for

* Luke xii. 4, 5. † Dan. ii. 47.

righteouſneſs

righteoufnefs fake, appear to act moft abfurdly. And fo they do, if this life be all. But if there be a heaven and a hell, their wifdom will foon be manifeft, and their bittereft perfecutors will be conftrained to admire their conduct, and to fay, "We fools accounted their life madnefs; and their end to be without honour: How are they numbered among the children of God, and their lot is among the faints*!"

A burning fiery furnace may feem terrible: and terrible indeed it is to thofe, who have no God to fupport them in it. Are you not afraid, then, of "the devouring fire," of "everlafting burnings," and of "the lake that burneth with fire and brimftone?" Do they excite no dread? Or will you not enquire, How fhall we efcape? What will it avail you, to enjoy the honours and pleafures of fin for a feafon, if you muft foon lie down in torment and defpair?

It is not probable, that you will incur any heavy calamity by a faithful confeffion of Chrift; for thefe are not times of violent perfecution. But your fincerity will be brought to the teft; and if you are unwilling to fuffer the leaft inconvenience for your religion, you are utterly unlike the examples before us. How would you have ftood "the fiery trial," which they endured? Or how do you anfwer the defcription of a difciple of Chrift, "denying himfelf, and taking up his crofs daily?" But if you defire "to keep yourfelves unfpotted from the world,"—to "follow the Lamb, whitherfoever he goeth," the prefent hiftory fhould increafe your belief and hope, while you obferve the

* Wif. v. 4, 5.

gracious

gracious interpoſition of God for the deliverance of his ſervants.

Perhaps it ſhould be conſidered as their greateſt deliverance, that they were not carried away with the ſtream of general corruption, and were ſtrengthened to reſiſt the king's commandment, and to continue "faithful unto death." But we are called to view a ſignal exhibition of the divine Providence in their preſervation. The mighty men of Nebuchadnezzar's army were conſumed at the entrance of the furnace; but the three Jews fell down unhurt, and in the midſt of the flames were ſupported by that faith, which "quenched the violence of fire *." Not even a hair of their heads was ſinged; no ſmell of burning paſſed upon their garments. The bands, indeed, by which they were tied, were broken, for they walked looſe in the fire; and there probably they enjoyed ſuch heavenly conſolations, as they had never known before. Their omnipotent Redeemer favoured them with his own immediate preſence: for a glorious Perſonage accompanied them, whoſe form reſembled the Son of God. This effectually ſubdued the fury of the king: he ſaw it to his own utter aſtoniſhment; and, inſtantly calling forth the perſecuted ſaints from their priſon, he reſtored them to honour, directed the attention of his ſubjects to their miraculous preſervation, and enjoined, that none ſhould dare to ſpeak againſt the God, who had done ſuch wonderful things.

We do not aſſert, that any ſimilar interpoſition is to be expected or deſired. But this ſtands as an eminent

* Heb. xi. 34.

proof

proof of the faithfulneſs and tender compaſſion of God to his oppreſſed people in their deepeſt diſtreſſes. Never was there a more ſtriking illuſtration, or exact completion of that promiſe, "When thou walkeſt through the fire, thou ſhalt not be burned, neither ſhall the flame kindle upon thee*." And to us alſo the gracious declaration extends. To believers in every age and nation Jehovah ſays, "I will be with thee,——I will deliver thee." Be confident of this, then, that He will extricate you out of all your difficulties: only ſubmit the time and the means to His ſovereign appointment. The intended help may be delayed, for the exerciſe of your faith, and for a brighter diſplay of the power, veracity, and loving kindneſs of your God. Do not complain, or be diſcouraged, if you ſhould ſuffer to the lateſt hour: He, in whom you truſt, will plead your cauſe, and call you forth to far greater honour, than Nebuchadnezzar did theſe pious Hebrews: He will place you at his own right hand for evermore. What a glorious company will there be, when all the ranſomed of the Lord ſhall return to Zion! Then it will be ſaid, "Theſe are they, who came out of great tribulation†;" and if you would be numbered with them, like Moſes you muſt "chuſe rather to ſuffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleaſures of ſin for a ſeaſon‡."

It is obſervable, that, however the ſituations and circumſtances of men vary, the ſame temptations have been offered in different ages. The integrity of the ancient ſaints and of the firſt Chriſtians was attacked,

* Iſa. xliii. 2. † Rev. vii. 14. ‡ Heb. xi. 25.

in

in a way ſimilar to that, by which we ourſelves are tried. The language of the world has uniformly been, "Come with us: Do as we do; worſhip at our altars; and conform to our cuſtoms." You, who follow the Lord Chriſt, muſt be prepared to anſwer. To be conſiſtent with your own principles, ſince you profeſs to "renounce the pomps and vanities of this wicked world," you muſt hazard every conſequence, and be willing to ſuffer martyrdom itſelf. And let even your enemies declare, whether it is not a more honourable part to ſtand faſt, through a firm reliance upon God, in defiance of death, than to deſert his ſervice, as if you had found him a hard maſter.

Perhaps, when you have cheerfully given up all things for God, He may reſtore them to you, as He did to theſe ancient worthies. Be that, however, as it may, you ſhall receive an hundred-fold in the world to come for all that you may now be deprived of. Then pray to God, that "in all your ſufferings here upon earth, for the teſtimony of His truth, you may ſteadfaſtly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory, that ſhall be revealed." Amen *.

* Collect for Saint Stephen's day.

BELSHAZZAR.

CHAP. XVII.

Belshazzar, grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, besieged by Cyrus —held an intemperate feast—introduced the holy vessels, in profane contempt of Jehovah—suddenly confounded by a hand-writing—reproved by Daniel—himself slain that night, and Babylon taken by the Medes and Persians.

THE great, Almighty Governor of the world is but little known or acknowledged amongst us. "Though He be not far from every one of us*," and we are constrained to feel our dependence upon Him for every breath we draw, yet who enquires, "Where is God my Maker†?" Is it because He is invisible, that we dare to neglect, dishonour, and provoke Him? Do we not perceive his footsteps on every side? Has not he frequently made bare his holy arm, and displayed the glory of his majesty, and the terrors of his justice, by the most awful judgments? Yes; He hath at different times compelled the most obdurate sinners, by some tremendous events or appearances, to confess and dread his power. When "the voice of his thunder is in the heaven; when the lightnings lighten the world; when the earth itself trembles and shakes‡," who does not feel a sense of God upon his soul? The effect, indeed, is often momentary. If a calm succeed

* Acts, xvii. 27. † Job, xxxv. 10. ‡ Psal. lxxvii. 18.

the tempeſt, commonly the perturbation of the mind ſubſides, and a careleſs indifference, a profane ſecurity takes place.

How little are men affected with the tranſactions of paſt ages, or with the denunciations of "the wrath to come!" Should one be ſent unto us from the dead, from the abodes of darkneſs and deſpair, to atteſt and deſcribe the torments prepared for the ungodly, a terrible alarm might be excited among us; yet even this would not be ſufficient to produce any genuine humiliation and repentance, as our Lord has taught us *: and probably, if it were not repeated, in the next generation it would be deſpiſed and laughed at, if not denied and diſbelieved, as an idle tale, or the fooliſh revery of a diſordered imagination.

The hiſtory before us will illuſtrate and confirm this obſervation. Is it poſſible, we are ready to aſk, that the miracles, which Nebuchadnezzar had beheld, ſhould ever be forgotten in the court of Babylon? Let matter of fact decide. Whatever might be the effect upon that monarch, it does not appear that any ſtrong impreſſion was made upon others, at leaſt not for any continuance, even in his own family. Belſhazzar, his grandſon, in the ſcriptures called his ſon, (which expreſſion implies only an immediate deſcendant) inſtead of learning righteouſneſs from the divine judgments, ſeemed to advance to a higher pitch of profaneneſs than Nebuchadnezzar himſelf; and, being ſuddenly cut down in his iniquity, he has exhibited in his deſtruction the tremendous juſtice of our God.

* Luke, xvi 31.

Perhaps ſome perſons may caſt their eyes upon theſe pages, who, according to their meaſure and ability, reſemble Belſhazzar in a daring contempt of God. O that we could prevail upon them to attend to this example, not in the way of reading a ſtrange ſtory to gratify their curioſity, but with the view of receiving inſtruction of a moſt intereſting nature! Here they may ſee the odiouſneſs of their own character and conduct, and the danger to which they are expoſed. The caſe is recorded as a ſolemn warning to all ſucceeding ages, to reſtrain preſumptuous tranſgreſſors, and convince them that there is a God in heaven, who judgeth the earth. May he diſplay his power among ourſelves, not to deſtroy but to ſave ſinners! May they tremble like Belſhazzar, when they perceive the ſentence of condemnation iſſued out againſt them; and may they feel, what we fear he did not, that "godly ſorrow, which worketh repentance to ſalvation!"

Years before Christ, 538. The only account, given of him in the ſcriptures, repreſents him as a bold offender, in a ſhameleſs ſcene of lewdneſs, intemperance, and blaſphemy*. If we advert to the ſituation of his affairs at that time, his conduct will appear the more atrocious. He had been already overcome in a ſet battle by Cyrus, the General and Prince of the Medes and Perſians, and for two years had been cloſely beſieged in his city†. But, inſtead of conſulting for the ſafety of his government, he was addicted to ſenſual pleaſures. Babylon, indeed, had nothing to dread from the moſt formidable attack, defended as it was by its

* Daniel, v. 1, &c. † Prideaux Connect. Part i. Book 2.

walls, bulwarks, gates of braſs, and eſpecially by the river Euphrates, and ſupplied with proviſions for twenty years. Belſhazzar, therefore, confident of his own invincible ſtrength, laughed at the attempt of reducing his capital. Thus he truſted to an arm of fleſh, and forgot what Nebuchadnezzar had learnt in ſuch a painful manner, "that the moſt High God ruleth in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomſoever He will." He would not be reſtrained in his career by the national diſtreſs; and at laſt he filled the meaſure of his iniquity.

A night was ſet apart for revelling, drunkenneſs, and all kinds of licentious mirth, with his wives, concubines, and a thouſand of his nobles. To this exceſs was added a high degree of profaneneſs, and an avowed contempt of Jehovah. The holy veſſels, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought from the temple of Jeruſalem, were introduced at this riotous banquet, perhaps to raiſe an impious laugh againſt the captive Jews and the God they worſhipped. As the ſeventy years of their ſervitude were then drawing to a concluſion, they might probably have intimated an expectation of returning to their own land, and taking theſe ſacred utenſils with them. In deriſion both of them and their religious ſervices, the veſſels were ſent for, and, we preſume, many blaſphemous ſpeeches uttered upon the occaſion. For, while the gueſts drank their wine out of thoſe very cups and bowls, which had been dedicated to Jehovah, they ſeemed to bid defiance to Him, by praiſing their own ſenſeleſs idols.

Is there nothing of a ſimilar ſpirit and conduct amongſt ourſelves? Are there no advocates for lewdneſs and intemperance? Are there none, who "run to the ſame exceſs of riot," and boaſt that they are under no control, as if they had a right to gratify their paſſions? Are there not thoſe too, who will not be reſtrained from their revellings by difficulties or diſtreſſes in their families or their buſineſs; or who arrogantly ſuppoſe, that nothing ſhall prevent or imbitter their ſenſual enjoyments? They ſay in their hearts, "Soul, take thine eaſe, eat, drink, and be merry;" and, "I ſhall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenneſs to thirſt." May we not aſk, then, Where is the difference between you and Belſhazzar, except it be that you have not the opportunity of ſinning in ſo extenſive a manner, as the king of Babylon?

Does it not alſo make a part of your entertainment to ſcoff at religion and thoſe who profeſs it? O beware, what you do! You may excite a fooliſh laugh among your companions, by throwing out profane jeſts in contempt of divine things, while the cup of intemperance goes round: but ſuch ſcoffs are ſerious matters, and moſt awful in their conſequences. They hurt not thoſe, at whom they are levelled: but ſhortly they will be like poiſoned arrows in your own breaſts, and "drink up your ſpirit." For by ſuch wanton mirth you blaſpheme the God of heaven. He will take up the cauſe, and avenge the inſult put upon his name.

Notwithſtanding

Notwithſtanding that eaſe and confidence, which ſome preſumptuous offenders poſſeſs, they may poſſibly, the very next inſtant, be overwhelmed with terror. It is only for God to give them a true ſight of their guilt, and to rouſe their conſcience to its proper office; and all their courage would immediately forſake them; their licentious ſongs would be changed for howlings of deſpair, and they would feel ſuch inexpreſſible miſery, as would be an awful preſage and anticipation of their final deſtruction. In the preſent example we obſerve that God has a ſecret and powerful acceſs to the minds of the moſt obdurate ſinners, and can ſoon turn "their laughter to mourning, and their joy to heavineſs." We behold Belſhazzar, in the midſt of his jollity and mirth, arraigned, convicted, ſentenced, and confounded. His inſolence and profaneneſs were ſuddenly repreſſed; and he, who one moment ſeemed to challenge earth and heaven, the next was obliged to ſtand and tremble like a criminal at the bar of juſtice. He ſaw a Hand put forth and writing upon the wall of his palace; and, though he could not read the characters, "his countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, ſo that the joints of his loins were looſed, and his knees ſmote one againſt another." He cried aloud for the Magi to come and explain the Phenomenon, and when he perceived that they were unable to give any interpretation, his horror increaſed, and his nobles were all aſtoniſhed.

It may appear ſtrange, that he ſhould be ſo terrified by certain unintelligible marks: for why might they not be ſuppoſed to foretel good ſucceſs? The caſe was,

he had an accuſer and a judge within; "his thoughts troubled him." The immediate influence of God upon his mind excited this alarm: and thus, in an inſtant, He can arreſt the moſt abandoned ſinner, only by making "his thoughts to trouble him." Many are ſtopped in their mad career, not indeed by the ſame means as Belſhazzar, but as evidently by the power of God, as if his hand were ſeen imprinting their ſentence on the wall. A great part of thoſe, who are converted to God in righteouſneſs, are affected in a ſimilar way, when by ſome awful event, a ſolemn word of admonition, or their own ſerious recollections, being awakened out of their ſtupor, they firſt perceive their wretched condition. "Their thoughts trouble them," at the remembrance of their offences, under a conviction of deſerving eternal puniſhment, and from an apprehenſion of impending deſtruction: and then the very perſons, who a little before, poſſibly, were blaſpheming God, cry out with unutterable anguiſh, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" A change of this kind is matter of joy, as it ſuggeſts the hope of repentance and ſalvation. But the terror, of which we ſpeak, is not in itſelf deſirable, nor do all, who feel it, turn out real penitents. In ſome an abſolute deſpair ſucceeds; and they experience upon earth a meaſure of that torment, which awaiteth them in the world to come. Could we follow them to that ſtate, we ſhould there alſo, obſerve that "their thoughts trouble them," and that they are conſtrained to gnaſh their teeth, through the inward horror of their minds: for God will ſet all their ſins in array before them. We cannot, indeed, form any

any ſuitable conceptions of their miſery: but the little we do know will juſtify our earneſtneſs in warning them to "eſcape the damnation of hell."

The confuſion of the king being publiſhed through the palace, the queen (probably his mother) entered the apartment; and, by her advice, Daniel the prophet of Jehovah was ſent for. As the principal officer, he tranſacted the affairs of government; yet it ſhould ſeem, that his company had not been much reliſhed in Belſhazzar's court; for the prince addreſſed him, as if he had been a ſtranger to his character. But we have often remarked, that the preſence and converſation of miniſters and other holy perſons, who were diſliked and avoided in a time of eaſe and proſperity, have been eagerly deſired in ſickneſs and diſtreſs. Nor ſhould they be unwilling to attend, and bear a faithful teſtimony, even in ſuch afflictive caſes. Daniel proceeded without heſitation to fix a charge of guilt upon the royal criminal, convicting him of pride, intemperance, and impiety, and repreſenting his wickedneſs, as highly aggravated by his contempt of the judgments inflicted on his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. He then read and interpreted the awful ſentence written on the wall, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN, which declared, that the Almighty Sovereign was bringing the kingdom of Babylon to a concluſion, that He had weighed the haughty monarch in the balances, and had found him wanting; and therefore that his dominion was about to be transferred to the Medes and Perſians.

Where is the ſinner, whoſe conſcience could remain calm and ſerene under ſuch a reproof as this? Be perſuaded

ſuaded to conſider your own ſtate and character. What has been your manner of life? and what is your hope towards God? Have you not "walked according to the courſe of this world, fulfilling the deſires of the fleſh and of the mind?" Perhaps you have alſo been, like Belſhazzar, inſenſible of all the judgments, which God has inflicted. You have ſeen one bold offender or another deſtroyed by the divine viſitation, and yet have never been truly alarmed for yourſelves. You may have heard of thoſe, even among your own families, who have been ſuddenly checked in their career of ſin and turned to God, through ſome heavy calamity; and yet you harden your hearts, and refuſe to ſubmit. "The God, in whoſe hand your breath is, and whoſe are all your ways, have you not glorified."

Do you preſume, that, as Belſhazzar's was a ſingular caſe, and as no ſuch reproof is addreſſed unto you, there is no need for you to be terrified? Surely you forget, that in the book of God there is a hand-writing ſent from Him, which expreſsly condemns you. It declares, that "you are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting;"—wanting in obedience to every command, wanting in every relation, wherein you have ſtood towards God and man; wanting, according to the demands of the Goſpel, as well as of the law. And is there no ſentence denounced againſt you? If you will not read for yourſelves, be prevailed on to attend to thoſe, who will explain it to you. Your days are numbered, and your time of grace is drawing to a concluſion. God hath made trial of you, and you are proved defective, throughout; and ſoon ſhall your

 beloved

beloved possessions be taken from you, and bestowed upon another. What then remains? or what awaits you beyond the grave? When you appear before God in judgment, what can you expect from Him, but indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish? You will there find, that the divine threatenings are not, as you now pretend, mere idle bugbears, which terrify only weak minds, but that they will be executed in full weight and measure.

Belshazzar stands as a witness of the faithfulness of God in bringing his menaces to effect. The boldness and security of sinners will not screen them, but may rather be considered as an awful presage of their approaching ruin. "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape*." This was remarkably fulfilled in the present instance. Immediately after Daniel's solemn declarations, in that very night when the riotous feast was kept, the enemies, who were besieging the city, took the opportunity, and by a very singular stratagem, having turned the course of the river, rushed in through the channel. The gates being carelessly (or shall we not say, providentially?) left open, through the intemperance that prevailed in the town, they met with no obstruction. They entered the palace, where the astonished king and his nobles were instantly put to the sword; and thus the Medes and Persians became possessors of that extensive dominion†. With Belshazzar,

* 1 Thess. v. 3. † Xenoph. Cyrop. Lib. vii.

then,

then, the power and pride of Babylon perished together; and all its boasted magnificence was soon after so entirely destroyed, that the very traces of it cannot be now found.

Here we behold the wisdom as well as the justice of God. All this had been repeatedly and circumstantially foretold by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Daniel. The very people, who should accomplish this event, were pointed out at the time, when the whole appeared in the highest degree improbable;—Cyrus, the General, was specified by name, nearly two hundred years before;—the very method of taking the city, by turning the waters of the great river into different streams, and thus drying up its channel, was described;—and it was farther predicted, that it should be done suddenly, by night, at a season of great dissipation, while the king and his mighty men were engaged in a drunken carousal*. Respecting the fall of Babylon, therefore, we are constrained to say, "This hath God done; for we perceive it was His work." He beholds at one view whatever shall come to pass from age to age: and "His counsels of old are faithfulness and truth." This destruction He appointed, as a punishment to the oppressors of his people, for their pride, cruelty, love of pleasures, and idolatry. It was "the vengeance of the Lord;—the vengeance of His temple †." O let his enemies fear before Him,

* Isa. xiii. 6—22. xxi. 2—10. xlv. 1—3. xlvii. 1, &c. Jer. l. 1, &c. li. 1, &c. Prid. Connect. Part i. Book 2. Bishop Lowth, on Isa. xiii. xxi. & xlv.

† Jer. li. 11.

and

and his servants rejoice in the certainty of his promises!

Where, then, is the pomp of this haughty monarch? —"cast out of his grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the pit; as a carcase trodden under feet*."—Here we pause, and follow Belshazzar no further. We have seen him cut off in his iniquity by the immediate judgment of God: and is there nothing in this history, which excites an alarm? Is there not a voice, which proclaims aloud, "Be ye also ready:"—and "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares†?" You have known similar examples in your own days, of those, who have been suddenly destroyed in their intemperance, their blasphemy, and their uncleanness; and their destruction displays the hand of God, as evidently as Belshazzar's did. What effect have these things upon you? Is it no matter of dread to be called away in such a state? thus to be hurried from the noise of revelling and profaneness to the tribunal of a righteous God? If, indeed, there were no eternity, no judgment to come, there would be no great cause to tremble; but, O impenitent sinners, a far more tremendous sentence, than that of Belshazzar, hangs over your heads. Your friends and ministers, therefore, who love you, may well be pained for you, and must faithfully admonish you, whether you will hear, or

* Isa. xiv. 19. † Luke xii. 40. xxi. 34.

whether

whether you will forbear, that the time of final retribution is nigh, the day of the Lord's vengeance, when his wrath ſhall ſmoke againſt every one, who dies in his iniquity. O turn to God, and do works meet for repentance!

If the ſolemn warning has produced its proper influence, and you have found mercy with God through his Covenant, how inexpreſſible are your obligations to Him! You would have periſhed, even as others, but He has had compaſſion upon you, "for his own name's ſake," and with a mighty hand has redeemed you to himſelf, that you may be a people for his praiſe. O tell of his loving kindneſs, and let your whole conduct declare the ſincerity and the warmth of your gratitude to Him!

Nay, if you are only juſt rouſed to a really ſpiritual concern, and you begin to tremble for your danger, we would ſuggeſt matter of encouragement and comfort to you. Your very fears may be ſalutary, a token that God is calling you to repentance. Only be willing to apply the remedy, which the Goſpel preſcribes. Behold the Saviour, who hath "made reconciliation for iniquity," and "redeemed us from the curſe of the law; being made a curſe for us*." Jeſus hath "blotted out THE HAND-WRITING, that was againſt us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his croſs †." Through Him, therefore, you have a full diſcharge. O believe, and be ſaved: rejoice, and give thanks, for the glorious hope, which is ſet before you through Jeſus Chriſt!

* Dan. ix. 24. Gal. iii 13. † Col. ii. 14.

DANIEL.

DANIEL.

CHAP. XVIII.

Daniel, his situation as a Jewish prisoner at Babylon—eminent for wisdom—interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's vision—promoted—maintained his integrity—not accused, like his three friends—explained the king's dream—reproved Belshazzar—prime minister under Darius—hated for his piety—worshipped God, contrary to the king's edict—cast into the lions den—rescued, and restored to honour—fasted and prayed—received singular revelations—probably obtained the release of the Jews—died in Chaldea.

"PURE and undefiled religion" is not confined to men of any one rank or situation in life. Some places, indeed, seem like an unfavourable soil for the growth of this noble plant; yet, notwithstanding difficulties, it has been known to flourish in all. The grace of God is sufficient to preserve us, let our circumstances be whatever they may; and without such assistance we are no where secure.

"Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called*; but we can refer to some persons of this description, in almost every age, who have been eminently pious, and whom God raised up for peculiar services to his Church. Their

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

excellence

excellence ſtands confeſſed by all; for their examples ſhine with a degree of luſtre ſuperior to others, in proportion to their elevation. The view of ſuch a character, though far advanced above us, may tend to excite us to greater animation and diligence in the work of the Lord. The preſent hiſtory will exhibit One thus highly diſtinguiſhed by rank and goodneſs. Let us acknowledge our own cowardice, coldneſs, and inactivity; let us learn to exert our utmoſt ability for the honour of our God and Saviour, and at the ſame time to walk unblamably "in the midſt of a crooked and perverſe nation;"—while we contemplate and admire the abundant grace, which reſted upon DANIEL. May we poſſeſs a meaſure of his ardour in prayer, his aſſurance of faith, his firmneſs and purity of conduct, that we alſo may "ſhine as lights in the world!"

Daniel was among the few faithful witneſſes, who were raiſed up for the ſupport of true religion during the captivity of the Jews in Chaldea. He was a deſcendant of David, and therefore, the relation, as well as intimate aſſociate, of Shadrach, Meſhach, and Abednego.

Like them he was taken at an early age as a priſoner of war to Babylon, where he very ſoon became eminent for his wiſdom and piety*. Ezekiel, who lived and propheſied at the ſame period, and in the ſame circumſtances, though probably much older, ſpake of him with the higheſt commendations. When reproving the king of Tyre for a conceit of his own underſtanding, he ſaid, "Thou art wiſer than Daniel."

* Dan. i. 1, &c.

niel*." He has alſo ſet him on a level with Noah and Job, as one of thoſe, who had the greateſt intereſt in heaven, whoſe prayers were moſt effectual†.

Daniel, who was diſtinguiſhed betimes, continued to maintain an honourable character through the ſeveral reigns of Nebuchadnezzar, Eſarhaddon, Belſhazzar, Darius, and Cyrus. Some remarkable events were accompliſhed in his time; for he ſaw the awful diſtreſſes of his conquered and enſlaved countrymen, and, after dwelling with them at Babylon during the ſeventy years of their captivity, he beheld their reſtoration, which had been ſo frequently predicted.

Years before Chriſt, 607. He was choſen, among other children "in whom was no blemiſh," that, after a proper degree of preparation, he might wait upon the king. In ſuch a ſituation, ſurrounded with idolaters, he had every temptation to forget and renounce the religion of his fathers; but even there his conſcientious regard to it very ſoon appeared. With his three pious companions, he refuſed to partake of the proviſions, appointed him from the royal table, becauſe he would not conform to the ſenſuality or the ſuperſtition of the Heathens, and therefore requeſted that he might be ſupported only with pulſe and water. In the mean time he carefully attended to the ſtudies, which were enjoined, as a qualification for future uſefulneſs. While he thus acted upon right principles, though his ſcruples might ſeem to expoſe him to heavy cenſures, he doubted not a happy iſſue. Nor was he diſappointed: "God brought him into favour" with his Tutor;

* Ezek. xxviii. 3. † xiv. 14.

and, though he lived abſtemiouſly, he enjoyed more vigorous health, than thoſe, who had the richeſt food. The Lord alſo gave him ſuch a portion of wiſdom, as far exceeded that of the moſt eminent perſons in Chaldea, and excited the aſtoniſhment of the king.

It is pleaſing to obſerve this tenderneſs of conſcience, this abhorrence of evil, and firm attachment to true religion, in young people. How rare are ſuch examples! What, in general, do we ſee at that age, but ignorance, thoughtleſſneſs, love of pleaſure, and intemperance? But is it not your concern, as much as it was Daniel's, to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth?" Do you, then, refuſe to conform to thoſe cuſtoms and maxims of the world, which you know or ſuſpect to be wrong? Are you not, rather, eagerly deſirous of every ſenſual indulgence, and ready to yield to every temptation? Is this the conduct you can juſtify? Or is it right to ſacrifice every good principle to a weak and fooliſh compliance with your company? Would you plead, as ſome do, that your time of life is the proper ſeaſon for gaiety and the gratification of your appetite, and that it will be ſoon enough to attend to that gloomy thing, Religion, when the ſtrength and importunity of your paſſions are abated? What an avowed contempt of God, to call his ſervice gloom and melancholy, as if He were a hard Maſter, and unworthy of the vigorous exertions of your beſt days! Or, how can you imagine that He will accept you, when you renounce your ſins, not of choice, but only becauſe you can follow them no longer?

You are deterred from a confcientious regard to your duty, through the fear of difficulties. But thefe are either created or increafed by your own unbelief; for in general thofe fuffer leaft, who are moft firm in their obedience to God. If you be attentive to your proper work, you will receive all needful affiftance and fupport: perhaps God will give you favour with your enemies, as he did Daniel.

An incident foon occurred, which proved the faith of Daniel, and paved the way for his advancement. The king Nebuchadnezzar, being perplexed by a fingular dream, the particulars of which he could not even recollect, commanded all his wife men to be deftroyed, becaufe they could not declare or interpret it*. Daniel muft have perifhed among the reft, had not the pious youth engaged his three companions to join with him in earneft prayer, that the fecret might be revealed. Accordingly, in anfwer to their petitions, Daniel obtained the defired information, and with warmeft gratitude afcribed the glory to the God of heaven. He related with an aftonifhing exactnefs the various parts and circumftances of the vifion, and gave a minute explanation of each. With great courage and fidelity, he then called upon the proud monarch to adore the omnifcience and fovereignty of Jehovah, from whom he had derived all his dominion, and who had condefcended to make known to him fome important events to come. Daniel was immediately acknowledged as a prophet of the only true God, and raifed to a ftate of high dignity: from that time he prefided as "Ruler

* Dan. ii. 1, &c,

over the whole province of Babylon, and ſat in the gate of the king." So large a recompence did his piety receive!

Power, riches, and honours were heaped upon the Jewiſh captive: but was this a ſituation to be envied? Or did he maintain his integrity amidſt the ſplendours of a Babylonian court? We have heard of ſo many inſtances, in which proſperity has been fatal to the ſouls of men, that we wonder to ſee any, who are riſing in the world, continue to poſſeſs the life and vigour of religion. God and his cauſe are forgotten and deſpiſed, in order to obtain or preſerve the ſmiles of a corrupt and wicked generation. "Man, that is in honour, and underſtandeth not, is like the beaſts that periſh*." "How hardly ſhall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God†!" Such being the ſnares of greatneſs, it is highly neceſſary to warn thoſe of their danger, who have the proſpect of preferment. Beware, leſt you give up your principles through fear or ſhame. Is this a needleſs caution? Have not many, who in affliction and diſtreſs diſcovered the faireſt appearances of real godlineſs, in eaſe and proſperity renounced their ſerioufneſs, and violated their moſt ſolemn vows, content to leave the duties of devotion to thoſe who cannot enjoy life? "In all time of our wealth, Good Lord, deliver us!"

Are we then, it is aſked, to reject the offers of advancement, or to reſign thoſe benefits and poſſeſſions, which are put into our hands? This we did not aſſert. Religion requires not a total retirement from the

* Pſal. xlix. 20. † Mar. x. 23.

world,

world, or a morose refusal of its comforts. We entreat you only to be faithful to God according to your place and abilities; and then, we allow, the more exalted your rank, the more enlarged will your usefulness be.

Such was the bright pattern before us. His highest elevation abated not his pious fervour, but rather rendered it more conspicuous. He forgot not his three beloved companions; for at his request they were all promoted to honour. When called to interpret the dream, which predicted the king's expulsion from his throne and from human society, though overwhelmed with astonishment and distress in the prospect of so tremendous a judgment, he dared not to conceal or to palliate the truth *. As the servant and minister of Jehovah, he warned the haughty tyrant of his guilt and danger, and, neither courting his favour, nor dreading his displeasure, exhorted him to immediate repentance. "Break off," said he, "thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity."—We fear, that reproof or counsel, like this, is not common in a palace. Nay, in much lower situations, how few have the courage or firmness to admonish offenders, however urgent the case may be! A contrary spirit too frequently prevails: men are flattered in their sins, their consciences lulled asleep, even while they are tottering on the brink of ruin: or if any terrors are excited, pains are taken to quiet their apprehensions, by

* Dan. iv. 8, &c.

foolishly suggesting, that many others are in a still worse condition.

Daniel gave a similar, or rather a more evident proof of his integrity and faithfulness in the service of his God, when required to read and interpret the hand-writing against Belshazzar*. With the utmost boldness and intrepidity he arraigned the king as a guilty criminal, convicted him of an avowed and insolent contempt of God, and then in the name of Jehovah pronounced the sentence of his speedy destruction. The ministers of Christ are especially concerned to possess the like fidelity and zeal in the discharge of their office, without regard to their own private interest. It is incumbent on them, "to commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God," by a plain declaration of the truth, without reserve or partiality. They must assert and explain the awful doom of sinners; and, though they might wish to deliver a different message, they must denounce "the wrath of God, which cometh upon the children of disobedience."—In this case their temporal emolument is not to be consulted, for they should remember, To whom they must give account.

It deserves our notice, that Daniel paid a serious and uniform attention to religion, and preserved an holy, spiritual, and devout frame of mind, not only in an elevated rank, but also in a continual hurry of important business. The chief administration of the government was committed to him, for he acted during several successive reigns as the first minister of state.

* Dan. v. 13, &c.

Yet,

Yet, notwithstanding that multiplicity of cares and engagements, in which this post involved him, he maintained the strictest regard to the service of his God. After such an instance, will any persons mention their secular employments and avocations, the fatigues of trade, or concerns of a family, as an excuse for negligence or remissness, in the profession or practice of piety? "We have no time," is the plea which many urge; but it is false. You are not diligent in turning to good account your scanty portions of leisure, and you willingly suffer your opportunities for spiritual edification to pass by you unimproved. No wonder, then, that we perceive an awful declension in your souls: Ah! how widely do you differ from the character of Daniel!

Years before Christ, 538. Upon the death of Belshazzar, an entire revolution in the affairs of Babylon took place. The Medes and Persians then possessed the power, under the government of Darius. Yet such was the reputation of Daniel for wisdom and integrity, that he obtained the office of highest dignity and trust, even in the new administration, and had the chief management of that widely extended empire*. But, wherever any eminent degree of true religion has appeared, though in the most exalted station, it has been the object of hatred and opposition. This is a strong indication of the depravity of our nature, that real holiness, when exemplified in life, excites disgust and persecution. Let those, therefore, "who will live godly in Christ Jesus," prepare for suffering, nor stagger in

* Dan. vi. 1, &c.

their minds, if their principles and practice expose them to the severest trials. Only let them be solicitous to maintain the honour of their profession, and "with well-doing put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." The case of Daniel will instruct and encourage them.

We do not read of any attempts or even objections against him, till the reign of Darius; but a conspiracy was then formed to subvert and destroy him. The presidents and princes of the empire were offended with his exemplary piety, and fired with envious rage at his preferment. They endeavoured to bring some charge against him for mismanagement of the public affairs: but such were Daniel's probity, diligence, and attention in the duties of his function, that their malignant designs, on that ground, were frustrated. They determined, therefore, to make his religion the matter of their accusation. What an honourable testimony they bore in his favour! "We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God."

This would be the strongest recommendation of the Gospel, if its advocates were, in like manner, so circumspect in their whole deportment, and so faithful in all their dealings, that their enemies should be obliged to confess, there can be no just objections against them, except for their singularity in spiritual concerns. If you would follow Christ, or profess a regard for his truth, "walk in wisdom toward them that are without;" look well to every part of your behaviour in temporal affairs, and to all your engagements in the world. For many will narrowly scrutinize your conduct, and will rejoice

rejoice to "find occasion against you," in your shops, your families, your various departments and occupations. Should they discover any perfidiousness, neglect, or inconsistency, they will not fail to bring it into public view, and reproach your principles and your associates with it. For the honour of God, therefore, endeavour to disappoint them; so that if they determine to accuse you, they may have no other cause, than "the law of your God," and your steadfast adherence to Him.

What, then, did Daniel's adversaries devise against him? They intended to deprive him of the free exercise of his religion, or to take him off by a violent death, if he should persevere in the worship of Jehovah. In an artful manner they persuaded the king to sign a decree, which flattered his vanity, that whosoever should prefer a petition to any god or man, except to the reigning monarch, within the space of thirty days, should be cast into a den of lions. An impious command indeed; obedience to which would have been sinful in the extreme. But could not the prophet evade the danger, without openly disavowing his principles? There are those, who assert, we should always comply with the country and the company we are in; that by prudent management we may avoid persecution;—that we need not acquaint others with our faith, and that it were better to keep it to ourselves. Thus many plead for a conformity to the world, and pacify their consciences, while they renounce every important position of the Gospel, in compliment to those, who know not God, or to screen themselves from opposition.

position. Shall we allow, then, that real piety is of this pliant nature, that we may conceal it from all observation, and that it contains nothing worth contending for? This would be to set aside or explain away every doctrine and precept in the Bible. "But we have not so learned Christ." Our religion is the most valuable and necessary concern: if it be any thing at all, it is every thing; nor should we hesitate a moment to give up our interest, our liberty, or life itself, in order to maintain it.

Such was the firmness of Daniel. With all his wisdom, he understood not those maxims of prudence, which are thought necessary now; and therefore he consulted not the fashion of the court, nor dreaded the wrath of the king, but cheerfully incurred the sentence of a violent death, "for conscience toward God." "He went into his house, and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime."

The devotions, here spoken of, were probably performed in the midst of his numerous household, as his family worship; for the time and place seem to have been well known, and his enemies, who were watching him for the purpose, found him in the very exercise, and heard him pray aloud. Great as he was, he officiated as the priest of his own house, and, amidst all the hurry of state affairs, kept himself at leisure thrice in each day to wait upon his God. Alas! how little is this duty practised, even where there are few worldly avocations, and no dangers to be apprehended!

It

It will be aſked perhaps, Why muſt he needs be ſo exact and ſingular? Could he not conform for a ſhort ſeaſon, abſtain from his uſual ſervices for one month, retire to a diſtant part from the notice of the court, or conceal himſelf from a diſcovery at home? We are aware of that plauſible ingenuity, which would make conſcience bend to convenience. But in any of theſe ways he would have been conſidered as renouncing his religion; the deſigns of his enemies would have been anſwered; and they might have reproached him with cowardice and hypocriſy. He did not therefore heſitate, but readily ſubmitted to the ſentence; and, upon the urgent demands of his accuſers, though the king himſelf laboured to reſcue him, he was actually caſt into a den of ravenous lions.

There may be a dangerous and abſurd ſcrupuloſity, a perverſe and obſtinate contention for trifles, which muſt prejudice the cauſe of truth and piety. But beware, how you extend the maxim of "becoming all things to all men." You may complain of ſome ſerious perſons as too preciſe; but do not your compliances harden many ſinners in their evil practices? Do you not teach them to deſpiſe your principles, through your timorous deſertion of them? Do you not prefer your eaſe, your reputation, and emolument to the honour and advancement of the Goſpel? Surely, in the view of Daniel's courage and diſintereſted zeal, you muſt deteſt your own ſelfiſhneſs and cowardice. "Who art thou, that thou ſhouldſt be afraid of a man that ſhall die?—and haſt feared continually every day, becauſe of the fury of the oppreſſor, as if he were ready to

to deſtroy?—And where is the fury of the oppreſſor*?" Let us ſee "the end of the Lord" in the hiſtory before us. Daniel was protected, his enemies utterly confounded, and the name of the true God made known and glorified throughout that idolatrous country. The prophet went down into the midſt of thoſe fierce and voracious animals; and what other conſequence could have been expected, than that he would have been inſtantly devoured? But he went down in faith; and therefore the very lions forgot their ſavage nature: "no manner of hurt was found upon him, becauſe he believed in his God." What amazing deliverances have been obtained, through a firm reliance upon the divine power! It was this very principle, in the preſent inſtance, "which ſtopped the mouths of lions†."

The king felt extreme diſtreſs for his perſecuted ſervant, and, after a ſleepleſs night, betook himſelf to the den early in the morning to enquire the event. He found the venerable ſaint ſitting in ſafety and compoſure among the furious beaſts, aſſerting his integrity, and aſcribing his preſervation to the gracious interpoſition of Jehovah. Immediately he reſcued him from his priſon, reſtored him to his former dignity, condemned his accuſers, with their families, who were all deſtroyed in the very way by which they had intended Daniel to have periſhed, and he iſſued out a decree, proclaiming to his ſubjects the glory of the God of heaven. May we, then, learn from this eminent prophet to ſacrifice every worldly conſideration to the de-

* Iſa. li. 12, 13. † Heb. xi. 33.

mands

mands of conſcience and the ſervice of God! May we truſt our all with Him, who has a ſovereign right to employ us and diſpoſe of us, as He pleaſes; and, leaving other inferior concerns, may we deſire chiefly and above all, that "whether we live, we may live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we may die unto the Lord *."

Do we admire the courage and ſteadfaſtneſs of Daniel? We muſt allow it to be the effect of that intimate communion with God, which he cultivated and enjoyed. He ſought help from above, and obtained his requeſt. We have remarked his attention to prayer in his youth; and we rejoice to obſerve, that even to old age this holy fervour continued with him. The laſt ſix chapters of the book, which bears his name, prove the warmth and the efficacy of his devotion. There we ſee him laying aſide the ornaments, which he uſually wore as a courtier,—abſtaining from his pleaſant food,—humbling himſelf in ſackcloth and aſhes, mourning before God, while he confeſſed his own ſins, and the ſins of his people,—pouring out his ardent ſupplications for their deliverance, and for the manifeſtation of the divine favour to them. Take eſpecial notice of this part of the hiſtory, and learn, whence you muſt derive that ſtrength and comfort which will ſupport you in your ſpiritual warfare. Is it not, becauſe you neglect retirement and the ſecret duties of religion, that your knowledge is ſo ſuperficial, your affections ſo weak and wavering, that you ſeem to have no fixed principles, and are ſhaken by every tempta-

* Rom. xiv. 8.

tion? If you do not cultivate an intercourfe with God, and implore direction and affiftance from Him, it is no wonder that He leaves you to be baffled and overcome. But were you conftant and importunate in your applications to Him, you would receive fuch fupplies of grace, as would enable you to maintain and adorn your profeffion, you would enjoy the ftrong confolations of the Spirit, and approach nearer and nearer to the temper and felicity of the bleffed in heaven.

Daniel obtained a large meafure of divine communications;—and he appears more glorious as the prophet of Jehovah, than as the prime minifter of the Medes and Perfians. He was admitted, as it were, to converfe with Angels, nay with the Lord of Angels, and was declared by Him to be "a man greatly beloved." The moft important events in futurity were revealed to him; and though his predictions contain "things hard to be underftood," which have furnifhed matter for learned criticifm, as well as devout contemplation, yet fome are fo direct and exprefs, that infidels have objected to them, as if they muft have been written after the accomplifhment. In anfwer to his prayer, the various revolutions, then about to take place in the empires of the world, the reftoration of the Jews, and the rebuilding of Jerufalem, were made known to him. He received the cleareft information concerning the perfon, the office, the work, and the benefits of the great Redeemer; the precife time of his appearance (after feventy weeks or four hundred and ninety years), the nature and defign of his fufferings; the troubles and perfecutions of the Church; and the final

confummation

consummation of all things, the resurrection of the dead, of some to everlasting life, and of others to everlasting shame and contempt.

He "had power with God and prevailed" in his secret devotions; he was also highly useful in his public capacity. Probably through his influence with Cyrus, the Jews were released from their captivity, and permitted to return to their own land; though he himself maintained his post, and, it is believed he died in Chaldea, being far advanced in years *.

What a value, what an excellency is stamped upon this character! You, who are greyheaded, and bowed down with old age, come and see in Daniel, what should be your perseverance, fervency, and zeal. Is it not your duty, as much as it was his, to "endure to the end?"—"to pray always and not to faint?"—We say not, that the like visions and revelations are to be looked for: they are not wanted; as the sacred canon of the scripture, containing every thing needful for our information, is now closed, and nothing is to be added to it. But still, through the knowledge and the faith of Jesus, you may enjoy communion with God; the light of His countenance; the manifestation of his favour, which "is better than life;" the consolations of the Holy Ghost; the hope full of immortality; the "peace, which passeth all understanding;" the "joy, which is unspeakable and full of glory."

Are these privileges, nothing? or are they nothing to you? Would you censure, as fancy and delusion, all experience or expectation of the comforts of reli-

* Prid. Connect. Part. i. Book 2, & 3.

gion,

gion, and ſuppoſe that real devotion implies no more than external ſhew and a lifeleſs formality? You are content, then, that all the happineſs and power of godlineſs ſhould be confined to the ſaints of old. But will you not wiſh to reſemble them, and to partake of their bleſſedneſs, when God ſhall be glorified in them, and they in Him? Yet, unleſs you be made like them here, you will be for ever excluded from their ſociety hereafter.

May the faith, the zeal, the holineſs of Daniel appear in all the followers, and eſpecially the miniſters, of Chriſt, that they may, together with him, "ſhine as the brightneſs of the firmament, and as the ſtars for ever and ever*!" Amen.

* Dan. xii. 3.

EZRA.

CHAP. XIX.

Ezra wrote the account of the Jews' return, and their rebuilding of the temple—his learning and piety—his commiſſion from Artaxerxes, and his journey from Babylon to Jeruſalem—reformed abuſes—engaged the people to enter into covenant with God—continued to teach, when ſuperſeded as a magiſtrate.

IN our contemplations on the ancient ſcripture hiſtory, we have had frequent occaſion to remark, that, as men have always been inclined to oppoſe and corrupt the religion which God has revealed, ſo the eſtabliſhment and revival of it have moſt evidently proceeded from Him. What thanks and praiſe do we owe to Him, who has graciouſly interpoſed, at various times, to plant or reſtore his truth! His ſovereign providence directs and controls all perſons and tranſactions with a particular regard to the concerns of his Church. The mightieſt potentates and moſt extenſive empires are exalted or brought down, in order to fulfil his purpoſes for this favoured ſociety. Accordingly He ſays, "I will give men for thee, and people for thy life *."

Years before Chriſt, 536. We are now arrived at a very important period, when by a wonderful diſpenſation the Jews were releaſed from their long captivity, con-

* Iſa. xliii. 4.

ducted back again to their own land, and re-instated in many of their former privileges. As this was an event of the highest consequence to that nation, tending to preserve religion in the world, and preparing the way for the appearance of the great Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ; as it is also a subject, to which there are frequent references in the Old Testament, it may be proper to take a distinct view of it, and endeavour to draw from it some useful instructions for ourselves.

Their re-establishment in Judea was not effected all at once, but at different times and by different means. They had been carried away at various seasons; and they did not all return together. We speak now of the first recovery of their liberty, as described by Ezra in the book, which bears his name, and of which, no doubt, he was the author.

It had been predicted by many of their prophets, that they should be brought back, and Babylon be reckoned with in her turn. Isaiah and Jeremiah, particularly, had declared this in the most express terms; the latter asserting that their banishment should continue, and their land lie desolate, for seventy years; and both of them foretelling, that their release should be obtained in consequence of the destruction of Babylon, by a people who seemed most unlikely to accomplish it, the Medes and Persians. Nay, the very person, who should be the instrument of this great work, a heathen prince and an idolater, was pointed out by name nearly two hundred years before *. According to these predictions,

* Jer. xxix. 10. Isa. xliv. 28. xlv. 1—4.

dictions, Cyrus, the general of the Medes and Persians, surprised and conquered Babylon, and despoiled it of its glory. He succeeded Darius* in the government, and, immediately upon his accession, published a proclamation, permitting the captive Jews to return to Jerusalem, and to rebuild their temple there *.

Known unto God are all his purposes from the beginning of the world; and when events so far distant, so utterly beyond the reach of human conjecture and contrivance, are foretold in the most circumstantial manner, we cannot surely doubt, that the information is received from Heaven. Here, then, we are furnished with an indubitable proof of the divine inspiration of the prophets. The predictions, also, clearly shew, that these revolutions took place, not by chance, but by the appointment and agency of God himself. He therefore claims the glory; for He says concerning this very subject, "I will work, and who shall let it? —For your sake I have sent to Babylon, and have brought down all their nobles.—I am the Lord, the Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King †." We stand in admiration of that sovereign influence, which He exerts upon all his reasonable creatures, at the same time that they fulfil their own wishes and desires. Daniel, probably, might have some ascendancy over Cyrus; but we look higher than Daniel: "the Lord stirred up the spirit" of this prince, in order to verify his own declarations. "The king's heart is in the

* Ezra, i. 1, &c. † Isa. xliii. 13—15.

hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whitherſoever He will*."

It is a delightful employment to contemplate the divine diſpenſations, and mark the tender and affectionate concern, with which the Lord watches over his people, correcting them in meaſure, only for their benefit, and returning, as it were with great eagerneſs, to comfort them with the aſſurances of his love. "He is faithful, that promiſed:" this is the ground of their ſecurity: "not one jot or tittle" of his word can fail. All the good things, which He engaged to beſtow upon his ancient Church, "all are come to paſs, and not one thing hath failed thereof†." With this gracious God, "who keepeth covenant and mercy to a thouſand generations," WE have to do. And ſhall we be afraid to truſt Him, after all the proofs He has given us of his veracity and "the immutability of his counſel?" As the captive Jews, encouraged by his declarations, were looking and praying for deliverance, let us alſo "wait for his ſalvation."

When the prophets ſpake of redemption from Babylon, they were generally carried out to deſcribe a much greater event, typified by it, our releaſe from ſpiritual bondage and eternal miſery, Redemption from ſin, death, and hell. The Goſpel aſſerts the completion of what they foretold, and proclaims this merciful releaſe to poor enſlaved ſinners, effected for them through the incarnation, ſacrifice, and interceſſion of the Lord Jeſus Chriſt. "The good tidings of great

* Prov. xxi. 1. † Heb. x. 23. Matt. v. 18. Joſh. xxiii. 14.

joy"

joy" are announced to us: let us cry out with gratitude and exultation, " Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: ſhout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into ſinging, ye mountains, O foreſt, and every tree therein: for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himſelf in Iſrael *."

The decree of Cyrus, doubtleſs, gladdened the hearts of all the pious Jews; but the bulk of the people did not claim the benefit. Many of them were comfortably ſettled in Chaldea, and therefore not deſirous of a removal. The immenſe difficulties of the journey, and of forming a new ſettlement in their ancient country, muſt likewiſe have diſcouraged all thoſe who had no ſpiritual views, no faith in God, or zeal for his glory. Only thoſe took the advantage, whoſe minds God himſelf diſpoſed to it. A divine influence was exerted, that the purpoſe of God might not be defeated. The caſe is exactly ſimilar, wherever the gracious proclamation of the Goſpel is carried. It is deſpiſed by many, becauſe they feel not their need of thoſe bleſſings, which it propoſes; by others, on account of the ſacrifices which it requires to be made, the ſevere trials to be endured, and the arduous work to be performed. Objections of this kind would entirely fruſtrate the mediation of the Saviour, and none of the ſons of men would accept the liberty, which He beſtows, if God himſelf did not put forth his power, and ſtir up the ſpirit of ſome to comply with the offer. O, how highly indebted are they, who are thus in-

* Iſa. xliv. 23.

clined to go forth from their natural ſtate of bondage, and direct their faces toward Zion!

Though many, therefore, remained at Babylon, a numerous company, together with their principal Elders, the Prieſts and Levites, took their journey; and, under the protection of Heaven, they were ſafely conducted to Jeruſalem. Soon after their arrival there, they ſet up the altar of the God of Iſrael, celebrated a holy feſtival, and preſented various oblations to Him *. With much zeal and diligence they made preparations for the rebuilding of the temple, that their religious ſolemnities might be renewed. For this purpoſe Cyrus had reſtored to them their ſacred veſſels, which were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar, and large contributions had been raiſed both among the Perſians and the Jews. In the ſecond year the foundations of the Lord's houſe were laid, under the directions of Zerubbabel, (a lineal deſcendant of David and their legal prince) and Jeſhua their high prieſt, of the family of Aaron. When the builders entered upon the work, a divine ardour ſeemed to pervade the company. The Prieſts and Levites in their proper apparel, and with inſtruments of muſic, praiſed the Lord and gave thanks to Him, "whoſe mercy endureth for ever;" the people alſo ſhouted with loud acclamations of gratitude and joy. The feſtivity, indeed, was in a meaſure interrupted by ſome of the old perſons, who wept exceedingly, when they recollected the ſplendour of their former temple, ſo much grander than this was likely to be. Their diſtreſs might have a bad effect, as weak-

* Ezra iii. 1, &c.

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ening the hands of the Lord's servants: and probably it arose from an unbelieving spirit. Alas! it generally happens, that the best designs are discouraged, and "the day of small things despised*."

Difficulties of another nature soon occurred. The undertaking, begun with alacrity and vigour, was impeded in its progress by various hindrances; and for a long time it seemed as if the whole plan would be defeated †. Their near neighbours, the Samaritans, whose worship was a sad corruption of the true religion, at first pretended friendship; but, when all intercourse with them was declined, their enmity clearly appeared; and, by false charges and invidious misrepresentations, they so far prevailed with the kings of Persia, as to stop the work during three or four successive reigns. At length the admonitions and exhortations of the prophets, Zechariah and Haggai, roused the spirit of the Jews, especially of their leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua, who had probably sunk into a very culpable remissness ‡. Being animated, then, by those pious teachers, they returned to the building with fresh ardour, and, upon being opposed as before, refused to desist. The ruling prince, Darius the second, was appealed to; and in a singular manner he patronized their scheme, and promoted it by a very liberal contribution from his own treasures §. Thus, after many delays, they finished the sacred edifice, and then consecrated it to God, and kept the feast of dedication

Years before Christ, 515.

* Zech. iv. 6—10. † Ezra iv. 1, &c.
‡ v. 1, &c. § vi. 1, &c.

with great ſolemnity and joy *. Their faith and patience had been long tried; but at laſt the Lord graciouſly interpoſed for them: for it was He, as they devoutly acknowledged, "who turned the heart of the king of Aſſyria unto them, to ſtrengthen their hands in the work of the houſe of God."

Are we ſenſible of our obligations, in being freed from the difficulties, with which they ſtruggled? Are we thankful for the houſe of God, and for the divine ordinances which are adminiſtered among us? Will not theſe very privileges be the condemnation of many? For are there not thoſe, who deſpiſe the church of God, and refuſe to join in any of our religious ſervices? Or again, do not ſome contend earneſtly for the external rites, and yet remain deſtitute of real devotion? Where, then, is their boaſted advantage?

While our thoughts are engaged upon this event, we are directed by Zechariah to fix our regard on a nobler, a ſpiritual building. He ſets before us the true Zerubbabel, the grand Architect of his Church, the Lord Jeſus Chriſt. "Even He ſhall build the temple of the Lord; and He ſhall bear the glory, and ſhall ſit and rule upon his throne; and he ſhall be a prieſt upon his throne: and the counſel of peace ſhall be between them both †." This ſtructure ariſes under His care, even in our own day; for he continues to lay one ſtone upon another. Will you lend your aſſiſtance towards

* The celebration of this feaſt, though not inſtituted by any divine appointment, was afterwards honoured by the preſence of Chriſt himſelf. John x. 22.

† Zech. vi. 13.

towards furthering the great design? "They that are far off," says he, "shall come and build in the temple of the Lord*." But there are many adversaries: difficulties of various sorts prevent the progress and increase of this sacred edifice. Yet let not the severest opposition or the most malicious accusations discourage you: for the Lord presides over his own work; and in due season it will be completed to his abundant praise. "He shall bring forth the head-stone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, Grace unto it†!"

Years before Christ, 457. For some time after the temple had been finished, and the religious services restored at Jerusalem, matters still wore an unfavourable aspect. Probably, the people possessed but little of the fervour of piety, and formed dangerous connections with their idolatrous neighbours. But the Lord would not suffer his own purpose to be frustrated nor his truth to perish; and therefore He raised up another instrument for the revival of his cause, EZRA, the scribe and the priest, a man most eminent for his learning, holiness, wisdom, and zeal‡. A large part of the Jewish nation had not returned from their captivity; and Ezra himself still resided at Babylon, about eighty years from the first decree of Cyrus. But his mind was bent upon promoting the welfare of Israel; and accordingly he had applied himself to sacred studies, that he might be qualified to render them some essential service. "He had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel

* Zech. vi. 15. † iv. 7. ‡ Ezra vii. 1, &c.

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ſtatutes and judgments." Artaxerxes, then upon the throne, being diſpoſed to favour him, granted him a commiſſion to the extent of his wiſhes. For he gave him full powers to go to Jeruſalem, with as many of his countrymen as were inclined to accompany him, to regulate the government and eſtabliſh the divine worſhip; and he himſelf, together with all his counſellors, contributed moſt liberally to promote the deſign.

In this inſtance, then, as in many others, the prophecy was fulfilled, "the ſons of ſtrangers ſhall build up thy walls, and their kings ſhall miniſter unto thee*." The Lord God, in a ſovereign manner, often impreſſes a fear of his majeſty upon thoſe, who do not cordially ſubmit to him, and influences them to maintain his cauſe, though they are not ſincerely attached to it. "Why ſhould there be wrath againſt us?" ſaid Artaxerxes. He expected, probably, to expiate his own guilt, and purchaſe peace with Heaven, though he ſtill remained an idolater. It is grievous, that thoſe, who go ſo far, will go no farther; and that they ſhould continue in ignorance of that very religion, they undertake to vindicate. They are uſeful to the Church of Chriſt, and yet never become members of it. We ſhould be thankful to God, however, who diſpoſes them to aſſiſt in his ſervice. Accordingly, Ezra devoutly acknowledged the divine interpoſition; "Bleſſed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put ſuch a thing as this in the king's heart."

Thus commiſſioned, the man of God, with many others whom the Lord ſtirred up to accompany him,

* Iſa. lx. 10.

prepared

prepared for the journey*. But the difficulties and dangers, which awaited them by the way, were enough to deter them. They had to travel to a very distant country, through a wild desert, exposed to hunger and thirst, the scorching heat of the sun, the rage of ravenous beasts, and the violent assaults of robbers, with little or no defence. Perhaps they felt some painful apprehensions; but they confided in the guidance and protection of Heaven: and Ezra would not ask for a guard, lest the king should reproach him, as inconsistent with his own principles, or distrustful of that God, on whom he had professed the firmest dependence. Immediately, therefore, upon their departing from Babylon, he summoned his fellow travellers, and joined with them in fasting and prayer, that they might commit themselves to the divine care, and implore all needful assistance; and then they proceeded in perfect safety to Jerusalem.

It is described by the prophets as a surprising dispensation of Providence, that they should be led, supported, and preserved, throughout such a journey as this. The Lord himself is represented as going before them to conduct them, and as their rereward also, to screen them from every attack; making bare his arm in the sight of the nations, for the salvation of his people; opening a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to his people, his chosen; and engaging, that no weapon formed against them should prosper †.

* Ezra, viii. 1, &c.

† Isa. xliii. 19. lii. 10, 12. liv. 17.

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Theſe expreſſions, indeed, have a higher reference, and direct our attention to a diſpenſation infinitely more wonderful, the deliverance of ſinners from ſpiritual bondage, and their pilgrimage to the heavenly Jeruſalem, under the care and protection of their God and Saviour. You, who have been long enſlaved to ſin and Satan, are exhorted to go forth from your captivity, and enter on this pilgrimage. Difficulties and dangers may await you in the road; for the preſent evil world, through which you are to paſs, is a deſert land, where ſome inſidious enemies may endeavour to inſnare, to plunder, and deſtroy you; where many ravenous beaſts may attack you with violence. But the Lord himſelf will be with you by the way, as your Leader and Commander: He will provide for you ſo that you ſhall neither hunger nor thirſt: He will be "as a hiding place from the wind and a covert from the tempeſt, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the ſhadow of a great rock in a weary land:" and under His defence, whatever oppoſition may be raiſed, "the redeemed of the Lord ſhall return, and come with ſinging unto Zion, and everlaſting joy ſhall be upon their head*." Will not this ſuffice? In dependence on your heavenly Conductor, then ariſe and depart; and cheerfully ſuſtain your moſt painful trials in the proſpect of that felicity, which he has prepared. "He will guide you with his counſel, and afterward receive you to glory†." O for the ſpirit of God to be pour-

* Iſa. xxxii. 2. xlii. 16. xlix. 10. li. 11. lv. 4.
† Pſal. lxxiii. 24.

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ed out in a more abundant meaſure, that men of ardent piety and zeal, like Ezra, may ſtand forth as leaders in the Church, to call ſinners out of their captivity, and go before them in the way to Zion!

No ſooner had Ezra arrived at Jeruſalem, than he ſet himſelf with vigour to promote the work of God. But he met with unexpected difficulties. A conſiderable declenſion had taken place among the people; and therefore it required his utmoſt exertion to reform the abuſes, which had been admitted. They had turned aſide to the abominations of their heathen neighbours, in conſequence of forming alliances and intermarriages with them; and, what rendered the cuſtom more general, and diſcouraged even an attempt to remedy it, was, that "the princes and rulers were chief in this treſpaſs*."

We have had frequent occaſion, in commenting on the ſacred hiſtory, to remark the many bad effects, which follow from the connection of religious perſons with thoſe, who know not God. It appears to have been clearly forbidden, and that on the juſteſt grounds, in order to preſerve the purity of revelation, and to guard againſt all corruptions both in principle and practice. Intermarriages of this kind have always been attended with miſchiefs of the moſt ſerious nature. While men and women conſult only their paſſions or their worldly convenience, in the choice of their partners for life, what can we expect, but that they will be compliant enough to ſacrifice the intereſts of truth,

* Ezra, ix. 1, &c.

neglect the divine ordinances, conform to the world, and bring up their children in ignorance of God, and in the fashionable vices of the age? Ah! whither must such a conduct tend, but to the utter subversion of all real religion?

How, then, was Ezra affected, when informed of these abuses? Confounded, and overwhelmed with grief, he sat down in silent astonishment with all the marks of unutterable distress. His behaviour excited the public attention; and at length all those, "who trembled at the words of the God of Israel," joined his company: after which, in the most open manner, he made known the anguish of his soul unto God. With deepest humiliation he confessed the ingratitude and perverseness of the people, who, in contempt of the goodness and contrary to the express command of God, had contracted alliances with the heathens; and he acknowledged, that they had nothing to look for at His hands, but entire destruction. It should seem, that he was almost afraid to deprecate the vengeance they had deserved; but he referred the matter to the Lord.

Was this a needless concern? Or rather, does it not become each one of us to weep and to pray, because iniquity abounds; especially when we observe very awful declensions and corrupt practices in the Church of God? Are these nothing to us? Do they excite in us no painful sensations? Do we not feel emotions similar to those of Ezra, when we see God dishonoured, his name reproached, and his cause sinking into neglect? Then let us offer to Him our im-

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portunate petitions, that He may yet arise and have mercy upon Zion, and purge away our transgressions. But alas! we have few persons like Ezra, to "stand in the gap." A general conformity to the present world has left us but little of the power of godliness. Even those, who should possess the greatest purity and zeal, "have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations." If we cannot correct these abuses, at least "our souls should weep for them in secret places."

Some, indeed, are bound by their office to do more than privately lament the prevalence of sin; for they should exert their abilities and influence to oppose it. The ministers of God, you will allow, must reprove, warn, and exhort, "cry aloud and spare not, and shew the people their transgressions." Without fearing their displeasure, they must not only intercede with God for their conversion and forgiveness, but declare his wrath against the offences, which are countenanced by general custom, even though the principal men be "chief in the trespass." Entreat them not to keep silence, much less to cry Peace, Peace; for if they do not admonish you to turn from your evil ways, from your pride, sensuality, and profaneness, your "blood will be required at their hands."——But Magistrates should interfere in a manner, which belongs not to Ministers. They should vigorously use the authority with which they are intrusted, to prevent and punish outward irregularities, and "not bear the sword in vain."

Ezra was not only a preacher of righteousness, but also a civil officer, commissioned with full power to regulate the affairs both of Church and State, to correct as well as censure abuses. The distress, he had discovered, soon excited a general alarm among the people. Perhaps, he himself was ready to despond; but when he perceived favourable marks of real contrition in them, and some persons of influence had promised him their support, immediately with great earnestness he entered on the work of reformation*. According to the law of Moses, marriages with idolaters were expressly forbidden; and therefore it was judged expedient, agreeably to the spirit of that law, that they should put away their strange wives, or those at least who refused to renounce their Pagan superstitions. He assembled all the men of Judah; and, after reproving them for their sin, he found them deeply affected with a sense of guilt, and unanimously resolving to comply with his injunctions. Many of them "trembled at the commandment of God;" and the whole company bound themselves by a solemn covenant to do His will; so that, probably, through Ezra's exertions a considerable revival of religion took place.

Years before Christ, 445. For a long time he continued to labour at Jerusalem in the cause of truth and righteousness. Thirteen years afterwards, when he was superseded in his commission as a magistrate by the appointment of Nehemiah, yet as a priest and a scribe he still taught and exhorted the people †. He brought forth the word of God, which he read and expounded

* Ezra, x. 1, &c. † Nehem. viii. 1, &c.

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to an immenſe congregation, upon whom his inſtructions produced the beſt effects.——It is generally ſuppoſed, that he collected together the books of the old teſtament, then received in the Church, (to which alſo he is thought to have added ſeveral of his own compoſition) and that he diſperſed correct copies of them through the land. Thus his private ſtudies, as well as his public efforts, were a peculiar bleſſing, not only during his own time, but to ſucceeding ages.——By our various talents we may promote the intereſts of religion in various ways. Such wiſdom, piety, and zeal, as we have here contemplated, muſt be extenſively uſeful. We ourſelves enjoy the benefits of his labours; for the ſcriptures, which he compiled, are come down to us. We thank God for theſe ſacred writings, now confirmed and illuſtrated by the ſtill clearer declarations of the new teſtament. They are the ground of our hope, the rule of our conduct, the ſource of all our conſolation. Let us value them as we ought, and endeavour, like Ezra, to ſpread them in the world. This muſt be the moſt effectual method "to turn men from darkneſs to light, from the power of Satan unto God." To this, in a great meaſure, we muſt aſcribe the ſucceſs of our Reformers; nor can we expect any great increaſe of genuine and fervent piety, except the word of God be generally read and expounded among us.

Ezra has exhibited an illuſtrious pattern to the miniſters of God, who ſhould learn from him to "take heed unto themſelves and unto their doctrine." "He

prepared his own heart to ſeek the law of the Lord, and to do it;" and then he inſtructed the people. In vain do they attempt to teach others, if they be not themſelves impreſſed with divine things, and eſtabliſhed in the love of the truth. Their own hearts muſt feel the reality and excellence of thoſe principles, which they inculcate; or elſe it is moſt probable, that their exhortations will be cold and ineffectual. All the faithful ambaſſadors of Chriſt ſhould be able to ſay with the Apoſtle, "We believe, and therefore we ſpeak*."

But this is not the concern of your ſpiritual Paſtors only. Whatever be your ſtation or abilities, you are required to exert yourſelves for the honour of God and the advantage of his Church. "Come to the help of the Lord:" yet proceed not raſhly to the work. While you are ſolicitous to reform and ſave others, begin with yourſelves. Conſider the worth of your own ſouls; ſo will the ſouls of your fellow creatures appear of infinite value in your eſteem; and when you have complied with the demands of the Goſpel, and taſted its ſweetneſs, you can direct, counſel, and encourage them. Is it your deſire? Ah! how many are perfectly indifferent about the eternal ſtates both of themſelves and of all around them! The miniſters and people of God, all ſee the neceſſity of exemplary ſtrictneſs and unwearied diligence: and are you at liberty to trifle with divine things, as if they were of no importance? While you hear of any one laying himſelf out in the ſervice of his God, and for the beſt intereſts

* 2 Cor. iv. 13.

of

of men, you ſhould be afraid for yourſelves; for ſuch an inſtance will render your remiſſneſs the more inexcuſable. May God pour out his Spirit, to enlighten his Church with the knowledge of his word, and inſpire every member of it with an abundant meaſure of faith, love, and zeal, that He may be glorified among us through Jeſus Chriſt! Amen.

NEHEMIAH.

CHAP. XX.

Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes—distressed for Jerusalem—went with the king's leave, and repaired that city—reproached and opposed—his faith and diligent attention—his liberality—resisted the various devices of his adversaries—his care for the government of the city—directed the scriptures to be read—a fast kept, and a solemn covenant made—dedicated the walls to God—at his second journey to Jerusalem, found and corrected various abuses—appealed to God concerning his services.

At the period to which we are now come in our consideration of Scripture Characters, the states of both Greece and Rome were rising to great eminence and dominion, and many persons of the highest reputation for genius and learning flourished in those nations. Of these, however, the sacred records make no account, but direct our whole attention to the little remnant of Israelites, who had just escaped from their captivity; for the small society of the Church is dearer to God than all the families, or all the empires of the earth. An Ezra and a Nehemiah are more truly honourable than the most renowned warriors and philosophers of the Pagan world.

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The hiſtory of Nehemiah very properly follows that of Ezra, with which it is immediately connected; for the former ſucceeded the latter, as Governor of Jeruſalem, at the diſtance of about twelve years. The reſtoration of the Jews was not then complete. Many had gained a comfortable ſettlement under the Perſians in different parts, who might therefore be unwilling to return. Of this ſort, probably, was the father of Nehemiah, who ſeems to have poſſeſſed conſiderable credit at Shuſhan, where he obtained for his ſon a place of great rank and profit, the office of cupbearer to king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah, then, from his very ſituation, enjoyed the moſt convenient opportunities of ſoliciting any favour from the prince, to whom he miniſtered; nor did he fail to improve the advantage, for he exerted all his influence in behalf of his diſtreſſed countrymen the Jews.

We have ſeen from various inſtances, that perſons of real and fervent piety may reſide even in a palace, and that too among idolaters. So circumſtanced indeed, they are expoſed to peculiar ſnares and difficulties; but on this very account the grace of God is magnified the more, by their firmneſs, courage, and perſeverance in the profeſſion and defence of true religion. Such was Nehemiah: may we, in a lower condition, be enabled to reſiſt the temptations which beſet us, and not be aſhamed to avow ourſelves on the ſide of the deſpiſed people of God! May we labour, with unwearied diligence, to promote the intereſts of his Church, and, like Nehemiah, turn our hearts towards

Jerusalem, "to raise up the decayed places thereof," and "to repair the breaches!"

Years before Christ, 445. He dwelt in the court of Artaxerxes, where he might have lived in ease, and splendour, and every sensual gratification; but he was willing to forego all private considerations, when the glory of God was at stake. It may appear suspicious, if those pretend to renounce the world, and to be dead to its enjoyments, who are cut off from all possibility of attaining them; but to reject its enticing offers, and then to be crucified to it, when most solicited to join in its pleasures,—this is a strong proof, and an illustrious display, of divine grace. We have already seen, in the history of Moses and Daniel, that "faith overcometh the world;" and the very same excellent spirit, which they discovered amidst the magnificence of a palace, rested on Nehemiah. His greatness and dignity were irksome to him, when he heard that the people of God, to whom he thought it his honour to be allied, "were in great affliction and reproach," left defenceless and exposed to the assaults of their surrounding enemies. "He sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven*." He confessed the justice of God in their severest calamities, and, from the remembrance of former gracious deliverances, was encouraged to implore his merciful interposition, particularly requesting, that the king's heart might be disposed to favour and assist his plan.

* Nehem. i. 1, &c.

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The diſtreſs of his mind ſoon appeared in the gloom of his countenance; and to the enquiries of Artaxerxes concerning it he frankly declared, that it aroſe from the deſolate condition of Jeruſalem*. He was then emboldened to make known his wiſhes; but, before he offered his petition, though he was waiting as an attendant in the royal preſence, he darted up an earneſt ſupplication to Heaven for the ſucceſs of it. We fear, ſuch piety as this is uncommon in a courtier. But, whatever we are, in all our concerns and undertakings, it is incumbent upon us to "commit our way unto the Lord:" nor can any ſituation or circumſtances prevent us from calling down His help by an ejaculatory kind of addreſs, which, though ſhort and interrupted, generally diſcovers a peculiar ardour of mind, and prevails to obtain the bleſſing. It may be uſed in a crowd, as well as in the cloſet.

After ſeeking to God for direction and aſſiſtance, we may be the more emboldened to proceed. Nehemiah ſolicited leave of his ſovereign to go, and build and fortify Jeruſalem; nor did he fail in his requeſt. Hear his grateful acknowledgment, "The king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me." What a firm perſuaſion did this expreſs, of the over-ruling influence of God upon the heart of his royal maſter! The favour procured was, alſo, the more precious, as being received in anſwer to prayer. Will not this reprove the infidelity, we had almoſt ſaid the atheiſm, of many amongſt us? In purſuing your ſchemes of buſineſs, do you not depend on your

* Nehem. ii. 1, &c.

own wisdom and good management to acquire success, and disdain to ask it as a petitioner at the throne of grace? Or, if by extreme difficulties you have been driven to make supplication to Heaven, have you been as loud in your thanksgivings, as you were in your cries for deliverance? Is it the language of your minds, "This has been granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me?".

With a full commission, then, for the execution of his designs, and conducted by the king's guards, Nehemiah left the court, and undertook the wearisome and dangerous journey, animated with this one desire, "to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." How rare is such self-denial, such a readiness to suffer for religion! Many, who speak well of Christ, and profess good wishes for the advancement of his cause, when the strength of their attachment is tried, are unwilling to sacrifice their pleasures, ease, or preferment: and therefore they care not that the Church is harassed and oppressed, while they are eagerly pursuing their own private advantage and indulgence. Ah! where shall we find any resemblance of the pious disinterestedness of Nehemiah, who, from an unfeigned love to God and his people, forsook the palace of Artaxerxes, and submitted to a state of difficulty, contempt, and opposition at Jerusalem?

This was the city, which God had chosen to put his name there, in which the temple was built, and the holy solemnities celebrated. While Jerusalem, therefore, remained in a desolate condition, there could be but little hope of the progress of religion. Much had been

been done under Zerubbabel and Ezra, to repair her waste places; but much was still left for Nehemiah to accomplish. The walls were broken down, and the inhabitants continually liable to the incursions and devastations of their hostile neighbours. Behold, then, this zealous governor, exerting himself for the restoration and defence of Zion. He had mourned and prayed for her; now, with an astonishing firmness and ardour, he undertook the most laborious work on her behalf. Soon after his arrival, he began the necessary preparations; and, to prevent his designs being frustrated, he carefully examined the state of the city by night. Having assembled the priests and rulers, he declared his purpose, and the object of his commission, and exhorted them to second his endeavours with the utmost vigour. Nor did he impose a toil upon others, to which he would not himself submit: he did not leave it to underlings, but "Come," said he, "and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." Such an attempt as this could scarcely fail of succeeding: for who could resist the call? They instantly replied, "Let us rise up and build."——"So they strengthened their hands for this good work."

The application to ourselves is obvious. Jerusalem, indeed, has long since been destroyed; but the Church of Christ solicits your help. Is not this holy city desolate, and exposed to various assaults? And does the consideration of its low state cause you any grief? Do you fast and pray, and labour to promote its advancement? Though you possess not the power and abilities of Nehemiah, are you exerting what you have?

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It may be expedient for you to exhort others; but let them see that you yourselves are in earnest, and that you decline no task, which you would enjoin them. Your counsels will be most likely to be regarded, when recommended by your own example. We fear, that other inferiour concerns, business, pleasures, or the support of a party, engage your attention; and that Zion and her welfare are nothing to you. Perhaps, you are so far from building up, that you would demolish, the walls of Jerusalem. Ah! what madness is this! for "God is in the midst of her;" and will you presume to fight against the omnipotent Jehovah?

The pleas, commonly urged in excuse for inactivity and cowardice, are such as these, "We are so feeble and inconsiderable, that our assistance would avail nothing:—It were vain to make any attempt for the honour of God in our narrow sphere of action."——If you think meanly of yourselves, it is well: but if you are unwilling to put yourselves to trouble, or if you cannot trust the Lord for strength, protection, and success in the performance of your duty, you are "the fearful and unbelieving,—the wicked and slothful servants," who will be "cast into outer darkness."

"Difficulties are in the way:"—Then be the more vigorous to overcome them. "But we have many adversaries:"—So indeed you must have, if you work the work of God: and if this argument be of any weight, Nehemiah might have remained at Shushan. We shall observe, that, though he possessed so excellent a spirit, and acted from such pure, disinterested motives, he was resisted and vilified, as if he had been

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the baſeſt character. Yet he perſevered and proſpered againſt the bittereſt perſecution. May we learn to ſuffer with a ſimilar meekneſs, firmneſs, and courage!

No ſooner was his deſign known in Judea, than certain powerful enemies diſcovered the utmoſt chagrin. They began to reproach and ridicule his attempt; but he regarded not their words, declaring, that he truſted in the God of heaven for ſupport. The oppoſition ſeemed to increaſe in its violence: yet, while they ſet upon him with a mixture of contempt and indignation, he betook himſelf to prayer, and committed his cauſe to God*. They formed a conſpiracy to attack Jeruſalem with an armed force, and demoliſh the fortification. His own people, alſo, were diſpirited; and, through exceſs of fatigue, they deſired to decline the further proſecution of the plan. But the good man remained unſhaken and undaunted; and by his prudent and pious conduct the adverſaries were utterly baffled. He ſought help from God by fervent ſupplication, and at the ſame time neglected not the proper means of defence; for he appointed a watch to obſerve their motions day and night. By his animated addreſs he raiſed the drooping minds of his countrymen; and afterwards they proceeded with uncommon cheerfulneſs and vigour. Even while they continued to labour with one hand, in the other they held a weapon; and ſo inceſſant was their attention to the work, that they did not allow themſelves to put off their clothes for ſleep. How eminent a pattern of entire reliance upon God

* Nehem. iv. 1, &c.

accompanied with circumſpection and diligence in duty, notwithſtanding extreme difficulties and diſtreſs!

Theſe ſtrenuous efforts for the fortifying of the city ſeem to have been interrupted awhile by the complaints of the people, who were involved in the heavieſt calamities*. Through the preſſure of famine, they had been obliged to mortgage their lands and houſes, and even to ſell their children to their richer brethren, for the purchaſe of proviſions, and the payment of the king's tribute. They therefore repreſented their grievances to Nehemiah, and ſtated, that the utmoſt exaction and cruelty had been practiſed upon them. Immediately he took up their cauſe, and ſet himſelf with great firmneſs to procure them redreſs. He rebuked the men of power and opulence for their uſurious and oppreſſive conduct, declaring, "It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God, becauſe of the reproach of the heathen, our enemies?" What a forcible argument for a holy vigilance, to thoſe who are truly concerned for the glory of God! May it produce its proper influence upon us! Have we not thoſe around us, who narrowly obſerve our ſpirit and behaviour, and would not fail to reproach us with the leaſt inconſiſtency? On their account, therefore, we ſhould be the more careful, "to walk in the fear of our God:" and thus an Apoſtle exhorts, "that the name of God and his doctrine be not blaſphemed†."

The pious governor, not content with reproving, corrected the abuſe. He required the nobles and the rulers to make reſtitution, and promiſe by a ſolemn

* Nehem. v. 1, &c. † 1 Tim. vi. 1.

covenant, never to renew the extortion. His example, indeed, might have shamed them out of their mean and injurious practices. He had left a situation of great ease, honour, and profit; and not only forbore to receive the support due to his office for twelve years, but at an immense expence maintained his numerous attendants; in order to carry on the work, and hospitably entertained at his table above a hundred and fifty persons more. For all this he expected no recompence from men; but he rejoiced in the thought, that it would be favourably regarded by a faithful and gracious God.—This is such an instance of noble and disinterested liberality, as is rarely to be met with. Yet wherever the love of God expands the heart, the hand also will be open to promote his cause and relieve his people. Let us beware of covetousness, which is inimical to true religion, and has been the source of infinite mischief and misery in the world. We have heard of those, who have thereby "erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*." But here we see the prophet's declaration exemplified; "the liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things shall he stand†."

Nehemiah felt further difficulties from outward opposition: and this, too, was aided by a traiterous correspondence, which some of the nobles within the city carried on. His adversaries tried various stratagems to destroy him, or to divert him from his work through terror‡. They pretended to invite him to a friendly

* 1 Tim. vi. 10. † Isa. xxxii. 8. ‡ Nehem. vi. 1, &c.

conference;

conference; but he discovered their malicious design; and therefore prudently replied, that such and so important were his engagements, as not to allow the least avocation. Four times together they failed of succeeding by this artifice. Then they cast upon him the old stale reproach, that his only object was to stir up sedition, and renounce his allegiance to his prince. The infamous charge was denied with all the firmness of integrity; yet it occasioned some fear in the minds of the people: and Nehemiah found it necessary to implore the help of God, that his hands might be strengthened.

At last they contrived another scheme: under a pretence of consulting his safety, they wished to draw him into a dishonourable conduct, in which they would have triumphed. They therefore hired a false prophet, who feigned a revelation, and advised the governor to take refuge in the temple, that he might preserve his threatened life. Here, however, they were disappointed as before; for, with an undaunted courage, a steadfast dependence upon God, and a strict regard to the credit of that religion which he professed, he replied, "Should such a man as I flee?—I will not go in."

You, who are the disciples of Christ, should be aware, that similar snares will probably be laid for you, and that a similar caution and fortitude on your part will secure you from many dangers. Your enemies may invite you to join their councils, and to visit them on terms of intimacy. But say, as Nehemiah, "I am doing a great work; I cannot come down." They may impute to you the basest intentions, and accuse you

you as discontented and seditious persons. But repel the charge, without being disheartened by it; and cry earnestly to God, that amidst their clamours He would "strengthen your hands." They may endeavour to terrify you by various menaces; and if they so far prevail as to stagger your faith, they will succeed to your hurt. How awful will be the consequence, if "a standard-bearer faint," if a Christian of peculiar eminence or long continuance in the Church, fall from his steadfastness, or renounce his principles! Be ready therefore to answer, "Should such a man as I flee?"

Their design was to reproach Nehemiah with the very sin, to which they tempted him: and this is the common practice of Satan and his agents. They will propose and recommend to you such a conduct, as they know to be inconsistent with your character and engagements; and, if you comply, they will despise and upbraid you for it. But, by a bold and strict adherence to your religious professions, you will impress them with a secret reverence and esteem for you; at least, you will appear honourable in their eyes, even though they hate you. Thus you will confound their purposes, whilst you are proof against seduction. Thus, also, you will ensure to yourselves the protection of a faithful, Almighty God, who will preserve you amidst multiplied dangers, and prosper your pious designs for the glory of his name.

At length, in fifty-two days, the city was inclosed, the wall completed, and the gates set up, through Nehemiah's uncommon assiduity and perseverance. Then indeed his malicious opponents were astonished, and

dejected,

dejected, and constrained to acknowledge the hand of God in the event. "They were much cast down in their own eyes, for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God."—Such also will be the happy issue to you, "who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory, and honour, and immortality." The Lord, whom you serve with diligence and fidelity, will support you through all your trials, and finally "perfect that which concerneth you*:" "They, who hate you, will see it and be ashamed†." For "they shall be troubled with terrible fear, and shall be amazed at the strangeness of your salvation, so far beyond all that they looked for‡." How wretched, then, is their state, to whom it will be said, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish§!"

The work of fortification being ended, proper measures were adopted for internal regulation. Nehemiah deputed faithful men, who should take the charge of the town, of its government and defence, while he, probably, returned to the court of Artaxerxes ||. But he had a higher concern for his countrymen, than merely of a political kind; for it was his grand object to establish among them the service and worship of God. In conjunction with Ezra, the scribe, he caused the scriptures to be publicly read and expounded to them; the good effects of which immediately appeared ¶. They saw, confessed, and lamented with deep contrition and distress, the heinousness of their guilt; yet he encouraged them, for that season especially, to indulge

* Psal. cxxxviii. 8. † lxxxvi. 17. ‡ Wisd. v. 2.
§ Acts xiii. 41. || Nehem. vii. 1, &c. ¶ viii. 1, &c.

a holy

a holy joy, as this would minister strength to their souls, and bear them up above all their trials. The celebration of the sacred festivals, appointed by the law, was renewed. A solemn fast was instituted, and kept with a peculiar seriousness by all the people. They assembled before God with all the marks of unfeigned repentance, acknowledged their iniquities, and earnestly implored the divine forgiveness and favour towards them *. Nor was this all: they entered into an express covenant with God, declaring their entire devotedness to Him in a written agreement, which they signed and sealed. They bound themselves to take the word of God for their guide and direction, to renounce all intimate connections with their idolatrous neighbours, to guard against every profanation of the sabbath, and to adhere with great care and exactness to all the services of the temple †. Nehemiah also provided for the better defence of the city, by promoting an increase of its inhabitants. For that purpose he ordered, that, besides the rulers and those who offered themselves freely, every tenth person should be chosen by lot out of the rest of the people, to dwell at Jerusalem ‡. These necessary regulations being settled, the walls of the town, erected with so much labour, were dedicated to God with all the solemnities of devotion; and loud acclamations of gratitude and joy were raised to Him, who had engaged to protect the place for his own name's sake §.

* Nehem. ix. 1, &c. † x. 1, &c.
‡ xi. 1, &c. § xii. 27, &c.

Do we not perceive, through the whole of this history, that an upright, pious governor is an invaluable blessing? Though religion be not, as some assert, a mere state engine, it is admirably adapted to promote the welfare and prosperity of nations, as well as of individuals. Those, then, who despise and oppose divine revelation, are the greatest enemies, not only to the spiritual and eternal interests, but to the temporal happiness and security, of their fellow creatures. Yet such we have among ourselves, who, while they plead for what they call "freethinking," undermine the very foundations of civil society.——If they, who possess authority, firmly believe the scriptures, they will be anxious to spread the knowledge of them, and will appoint and enforce the solemn celebration of the sacred ordinances. They will most effectually consult the real good of the community, by providing public means of instruction in the word of God. For we doubt not, that the faithful preaching of the Gospel, seriously attended to, would repress the wickedness of the world, more than prisons, chains, and gallows.

Years before Christ about 430. Nehemiah returned to his office at the Persian court, and after some time obtained leave of the king to revisit Jerusalem *. In his absence various abuses were introduced: so continually prone is man to depart from the way of righteousness, and to revert to his evil practices, from which he may seem to be reclaimed! Through the treachery of Eliashib the chief priest, Tobiah, that bold and presumptuous enemy of God and his people, had large apart-

* Nehem. xiii. 6, &c.

ments

ments prepared for him in the buildings of the temple, to the exclusion of the holy vessels and offerings, to the vile profanation of that sacred place, and the interruption of the divine service. Nehemiah was grieved for the declension, which he found upon coming back; and immediately he set himself to oppose and reform the corruptions. He cast out Tobiah from his possession, notwithstanding his high connections, reprehended the rulers for their desertion of the house of God, and restored the Levites to their employments and tithes.

The day of the Lord, also, was neglected and polluted: for many devoted it to the purposes of labour and merchandise, in contempt of an express commandment. But the pious magistrate reproved and threatened the offenders, and thus checked the horrid violation. How important an object for the attention of governors! For the strict observation of the sabbath is not only necessary to the progress, and the very being, of religion, but also conducive to the comfort and welfare of society.

Intermarriages with idolaters had likewise prevailed afresh. But here again the authority of Nehemiah interposed. He very sharply censured, warned, and punished the guilty persons, though some were high in rank and office; and, after separating them from their profane connections, he obliged them to enter into a solemn covenant with God, that they would never renew them. Let Christian believers keep at a distance from such alliances as these, lest they abandon or dis-

grace their principles, and "concerning faith make shipwreck."

We have seen, then, through the whole spirit and conduct of this holy man an uniform abhorrence of evil, and a zealous concern for the service and glory of God; a disregard of his own ease and interest, and a readiness to suffer any thing for the good of the Church. What a pattern, not to magistrates alone, but to those, who fill a private station! Doubtless, we may all assist in the great work of reformation. How much is wanted! and how much might be effected by proper exertions! But let us remember to begin with ourselves. Though others may be unwilling, let us determine, to renounce and oppose every wicked way. For "except we repent, we shall all perish."

In the perusal of Nehemiah's history, we are struck with the frequent appeals he makes to the God of heaven, respecting his own performances. After relating what he had done for his people, he cries out again and again, "Think upon me, my God, for good:— Remember me, O my God, concerning this; and wipe not out my good deeds, &c *." Such language may seem inconsistent with the diffidence and contrition of a truly humble mind, convinced of the deficiency and defilement of its most holy duties. Ah! who shall dare to mention his own righteousness, in the presence of his God and Judge? For "in His sight shall no man living be justified †." But we ap-

* Nehem. v. 19. xiii. 14, 31. † Psal. cxliii. 2.

prehend,

prehend, that Nehemiah ſpake not with the arrogant expectations of a Phariſee, as if he had any claim upon God for his ſervices, or truſted to them for his acceptance and ſalvation. For it is evident, he felt and confeſſed himſelf a ſinner, who could demand nothing from God, on the ground of juſtice, when he exclaimed, "Spare me, according to the greatneſs of thy mercy *." But we ſhould recollect, that he received no recompence, no grateful acknowledgement from men: probably, he lay under much reproach, and his very good was evil ſpoken of. Turning from them, therefore, for whom he laboured without any proſpect of a reward at their hands, he might look up to God with a cheerful hope, that what he had effected in His cauſe would not be overlooked by Him: and ſatisfied with the divine approbation, however miſrepreſented upon earth, he might devoutly pray, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people."

It will be well, if we alſo can appeal from the judgment of men to that of the great Searcher of hearts, as to our ſincerity, and can be content to wait for the retribution of our ſervices till the laſt day. We may ſafely rely upon the promiſe, and even plead it with God, that a cup of cold water, adminiſtered to a diſciple from a real regard to Chriſt, ſhall not be unnoticed. It is not inconſiſtent with faith, but rather an exerciſe of it, to expect and aſk

* Nehem. xiii. 22.

what He has pledged himſelf to beſtow. While we " have reſpect unto the recompence of reward," we remember, this is given us by the Covenant, and is entirely " of grace, not of debt." For after a life of unwearied activity, and extenſive uſefulneſs, we ſhall ſtill ſee cauſe to abhor ourſelves, and repent in duſt and aſhes, and muſt cry out with Nehemiah, " Spare me, O my God, according to the greatneſs of thy mercy!"

ESTHER, HAMAN, AND MORDECAI.

CHAP. XXI.

Esther, a captive Jewess at Shushan, chosen to be queen—Mordecai, her cousin, porter in the palace, refused to reverence Haman, the prime minister; who, being thereby incensed, procured an edict for the destruction of the Jews—Esther, animated by Mordecai, sought and obtained favour for the Jews—Mordecai, honoured for his fidelity to the king—Haman mortified—hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai—Esther and Mordecai continued to exert their influence for the protection of the Jews.

It is the wise and gracious appointment of our God, that his Church in general, as a society, and each of its members in particular, must pass through much tribulation. They are called to struggle with a variety of difficulties, in some of which they seem almost overwhelmed, "ready to perish." But, while their faith is thus put to the trial, the grace of God is manifested in their holy conduct; His power, truth, and love are displayed by the deliverances wrought for them. An infallible assurance also is given them, that they shall

finally prevail over all the oppoſition of their enemies, and be preſerved to the heavenly kingdom, where they ſhall be crowned with victory and glory for ever.

We have had frequent occaſions to remark, that man's natural averſion to real godlineſs, which at all times diſpoſes him to perſecute, has in ſome inſtances been permitted to proceed ſo far, as to threaten the very exiſtence of the Church. But when all hope of ſafety was removed, God himſelf has miraculouſly interpoſed for his great name's ſake, to the comfort of his people, and the confuſion of his adverſaries. "The wicked plotteth againſt the juſt, and gnaſheth upon him with his teeth: The Lord ſhall laugh at him; for He ſeeth that his day is coming *." This is a general obſervation, which has been verified in every age: we ſhall now find it to be illuſtrated and confirmed by the ſingular hiſtory, recorded in the book of Eſther. Here the providence of God, protecting his Church, and defeating the counſels of its bittereſt oppoſers, appears in a ſtriking light. We may hereby be inſtructed to truſt ourſelves with Him, under the darkeſt and moſt diſtreſsful diſpenſations, being firmly perſuaded, that He will fulfil his own promiſe, "Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world †."

This little narrative relates a particular deliverance of the Jews, effected at a time when they were threatened with immediate and entire deſtruction, under the

* Pſal. xxxvii. 12, 13. † Matt. xxviii. 20.

reign

reign of Ahaſuerus, one of the Perſian monarchs. He is thought to have been the ſame with that Artaxerxes, from whom Ezra received his commiſſion: for, at the period, to which theſe tranſactions are referred, the Jews were far from being completely recovered from their captivity, but were ſtill diſperſed in very large numbers throughout the Perſian dominions. The book has its name from Eſther, who was a principal inſtrument of accompliſhing the deliverance; but it directs our attention alſo to two other characters, who are conſpicuous in the hiſtory, Haman a bitter perſecutor, and Mordecai a zealous defender, of the Church. May we all learn from it the folly, ſin, and danger of fighting againſt God, and be ſo convinced of the ſecurity and happineſs of his people amidſt all their trials, as to join their ſociety, and ſay, "We will go with you; for we have heard that God is with you *!"

Years before Chriſt, about 460.

The Lord God, who is perfectly acquainted with his own plans and purpoſes from the beginning, had previouſly prepared, in the court of Ahaſuerus, an advocate and a patron for the deſpiſed and oppreſſed ſeed of Abraham. We forbear to dwell upon the magnificence, luxury, and exceſs of the feaſt, which the king celebrated in his palace, and which gave occaſion to the divorce of his queen Vaſhti †. But in that event we perceive and admire the over-ruling influence of Jehovah, whoſe perrogative it is to govern the ſinful paſſions of men, ſo as to render them ſubſervient to his own glory. Whilſt they follow their

* Zech. viii. 23. † Eſth. i. 1, &c.

hearts'

hearts' desires, they infallibly proceed "to do, whatsoever His hand and His counsels determined before to be done*."

To supply the place of the discarded Vashti, another royal consort was to be chosen: and do we not wonder, that Esther, a young Jewess, should be raised to this honour? She was then in a state of captivity at Shushan; and, being an orphan, she had been brought up by her cousin Mordecai, to whom she paid the attention and obedience due to a parent†. She possessed such a peculiar gracefulness and beauty, that she soon attracted the notice, and gained the affections, of the king. At Mordecai's request, she had not discovered her extraction; as that might have prevented her advancement. But we are to ascribe her exaltation to God, who "putteth down one, and setteth up another," who "raiseth up the poor out of the dust, that He may set him with princes‡:" for He had designed to make use of her influence at court for great good. Mordecai also was intended to be an instrument in promoting the same gracious purpose. But for some time he remained in a low situation as a porter, or inferior officer, in the palace. Yet even there he performed such a service, as entitled him to the royal favour, and paved the way for his future preferment. For he saved the life of his sovereign by detecting and disclosing a conspiracy, which had been formed against him. How remarkably does one little incident lead to another, and

* Acts iv. 28. † Esth. ii. 5, &c.
‡ Psal. lxxv. 7. cxiii. 7, 8.

that

that to a third, on which events of the highest importance to the whole world finally depend!

Such was the posture of affairs, when Haman rose to the first dignity in the state, and obtained the place of prime minister over that extensive empire *. He is supposed to have been of the cursed seed of Amalek, and a descendant of Agag, whom Saul had been commanded to destroy: and, for that reason perhaps, he might be particularly offensive to the Jews, and their decided enemy. The king had enjoined persons of all ranks to bow down to Haman with the utmost reverence and homage; and Mordecai alone refused to render him this honour. It may not be easy to ascertain the true motive for his refusal. His objection, probably, was not merely that Haman was of a profane character, but either that he required an idolatrous kind of veneration, or that he sprang from that nation, whom God had pronounced accursed and ordered to be extirpated †. At least, from Mordecai's general reputation, we presume, that he acted on this occasion, not from pride or obstinacy, but from a real conscientious principle. Such a treatment, however, from a person so much his inferior, Haman could not bear. And now we shall behold in this Amalekite the most detestable tempers, and the miserable effects of hatred, malice, and an unsatisfied, disappointed ambition.

"He was full of wrath;" and immediately he proceeded to seek revenge. How insatiable was his fury! The blood of one poor Jew would not suffice: he de-

* Esth. iii. 1, &c. † Dr. Prid. Connect. Part. i. Book 5.

termined

termined that thousands should bleed with him. Being informed of Mordecai's extraction and religious scruples, he conceived the design of exterminating the whole race together, so that, if it were possible, "the name of Israel might be no more in remembrance." The old antipathy, then, of Amalek against Israel still prevailed in Haman; and opportunity was given him to shew, though not to fulfil, what was in his heart. With all the superstition of an idolater he cast lots, in order that he might be directed to the most convenient day for the execution of his plan: and even this very circumstance the Lord himself over-ruled. For the matter was so delayed, as to afford time enough to defeat his purpose. He represented to the king, that the Jews were of so singular, obstinate, and seditious a temper, that it would promote the safety of the government to destroy them all: and on this ground he obtained a decree for their utter extirpation, without regard to sex, age, or character. What a rash, impolitic, merciless edict! and how depraved must be the man, who could perpetrate or propose such a scheme of iniquity! Yet Haman seemed unmoved; or rather, he rejoiced in the prospect of success; for when the royal proclamation was gone forth, he sat down to drink with his thoughtless prince.

Every thing, then, appeared in a favourable train for the accomplishment of the project. But, though sinners are permitted to proceed, as it were, to the very point they aim at, an invisible, Almighty Power "puts his hook in their nose, and his bridle in their lips, and

turns

turns them back *." How vain, and contemptible are the ſtrongeſt aſſaults againſt Jehovah! "He, that ſitteth in the heavens, ſhall laugh; the Lord ſhall have them in deriſion †." Human aid will be found a poor ſupport to our ſouls in the time of danger: but a reliance upon the divine mercy and truth will diſpel our fears. Had Haman obtained his wiſh, and the Jewiſh nation periſhed; what muſt have become of all the promiſes? How could the prophecies concerning the great Redeemer of the world have been fulfilled? The everlaſting Covenant itſelf muſt have failed, before this diabolical ſyſtem could take place. But whence was deliverance to be expected? It is not often we are able to point out the method, in which God will interpoſe to help us; and yet it is our part to wait in faith and hope. "His way is in the ſea, and his path in the great waters, and his footſteps are not known ‡."

On the publication of the edict, the utmoſt horror and confuſion overwhelmed the poor, perſecuted people, who were marked out for ruin. Mordecai expreſſed the anguiſh of his heart by all external ſigns of deep ſorrow, and by his loud and bitter cries throughout the city §. At length, queen Eſther herſelf received information of the intended maſſacre, and participated with her devoted countrymen in their diſtreſs. Mordecai charged her to exert all her influence with the king on their behalf. But ſhe was afraid even to preſent her ſupplication: for the Perſian laws forbad every perſon, not excepting the royal conſort, on pain

* 2 Kings xix. 28. † Pſal. ii. 4.
‡ lxxvii. 19. § Eſth. iv. 1, &c.

of

of death, to approach the sovereign without his call; and she had some reason to apprehend, that his affection for her was abated. She expostulated, therefore, with Mordecai on the impropriety of venturing to offer her petition, when she must forfeit her life, unless she could gain so favourable an attention from him, that he would hold out his golden sceptre to her. Mordecai replied with an astonishing firmness, that the bloody decree was levelled against her, as well as other Jews, and that she must perish in the palace. He further remarked, that, if she refused to mediate, deliverance would doubtless arise from a different quarter, while she and her kindred would be destroyed: but he encouraged her to hope, that possibly her very exaltation had been appointed as the means of rescuing her nation. Upon this, she hesitated no longer, but consented to hazard her safety: yet she depended not on her own ascendency or management; for, observing a solemn fast for three days, she first sought the divine direction and assistance, and then approached the king.

We ought to feel for the calamities of others, especially for those of the Church, and should be willing to incur dangers and distresses, that we may procure relief for them. Though we know not, what instruments it may please God to make use of, such as we are we should devote ourselves, our interest, and abilities to Him, and rejoice to be employed in his service. It is an honourable cause to be engaged in; so that if our offers should be rejected, and all our attempts should fail, we need not be ashamed. But we may expect great things at the hand of our God, and believe that,

for

for his own glory, He will graciously fulfil the desires, which he has given us. Even a weak faith, such as Esther's seems to have been, has often produced wonderful effects. Doubtless, incessant prayer ascended up to God on this occasion; which was a token for good. For the cries of His people have power with him, and bring down his blessings upon them. Ah! why are we so backward to apply to him in the perilous time? Why do we ever cast away our hope, as if "He had forgotten to be gracious?" He cannot be unmindful of those, who firmly rely on Him, and humbly supplicate his aid. These, therefore, though feeble in themselves, having the Omnipotent God for their defence, are "terrible as an army with banners," and accordingly they have put their thousands to flight. In vain the proud Haman plans his bloody schemes; in vain Ahasuerus issues out his cruel edict, and millions in his empire prepare to massacre the Jews: the Lord listens to his afflicted servants, and rescues them from destruction.

Let us mark the steps, by which this deliverance was effected. When Esther presented herself before the king, his heart was inclined to favour her, and grant her petition, even to the half of his dominions*. She requested, that he and Haman would partake with her of an entertainment she had provided; which being acceded to, she desired that they would repeat their visit on the succeeding day. In the mean time, Haman, being elated with the honour of such a familiarity, boasted of it to his friends: yet his joy was damped,

* Esth. v. 1, &c.

and his indignation excited, while he observed that Mordecai still refused to shew him any reverence. What a confession of the vanity of all worldly grandeur, and of the misery of a proud, malignant spirit, did he make, when he said, "All this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate!" He, therefore, readily came into the proposal of dispatching this troublesome man; and, not content to wait for his removal till the general destruction, intended for that people, immediately he prepared a gallows for his execution.

Do we not perceive, in this arrogant minister of state, a character the most despicable and wretched? Yet many of those probably, whom the world admires and envies, as being exalted to the highest eminence, resemble Haman. Something is still wanted to complete their happiness; and so long as any one wish of their hearts remains unsatisfied, all their other possessions avail them nothing; they can taste no sweetness in them. Persons of the greatest power and dignity must meet with disappointments and vexations of this kind, which imbitter all their enjoyments. Such is the curse entailed upon human glory. Learn, then, that God alone can satisfy your desires: the whole creation could not fill or content your souls, but would leave an aching void without Him. You "call the proud happy," who display much pomp and magnificence; but you are mistaken in your estimate. Many poor cottagers experience far less uneasiness than they. Felicity is necessarily connected with the disposition of the

the mind: and an infallible witness has said, "Blessed are the MEEK, for they shall inherit the earth*."

"On that night could not the king sleep†;" nor was there any visible cause of his disturbance: but we should remember that our rest depends on the good pleasure of the Lord. In that unquiet state he commanded the records of his kingdom to be read before him; and the very passage was recited, which contained the memorial of Mordecai's fidelity in discovering a dangerous conspiracy. As it appeared also, that no reward had been conferred on this honest subject, Ahasuerus determined, that he should immediately receive some signal mark of the royal favour. Haman was then waiting for an audience, to petition that Mordecai might be hanged upon the gallows; and, upon the question being put, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour," this haughty minister suffered the most mortifying disappointment. He conceived himself to be the person intended, and therefore advised, that the object of special regard should be led in triumph through the city, with all the pageantry of the Persian court; and he was instantly required to bestow these distinctions on the very Jew, whose destruction he meditated, and to attend upon him as his servant.——What a coincidence of circumstances was here, all tending to introduce the deliverance of the Lord's people, and to defeat and abase the pride of their malicious persecutor! Who can forbear acknowledging, casual as these circumstances may appear, "The hand of the Lord hath done this?"

* Matt. v. 5. † Esth. vi. 1, &c.

Haman was completely confounded, and overwhelmed with anguiſh, foreboding his own total ruin. In the midſt of his diſtreſs, he was called to accompany the king to Eſther's banquet*. There the queen remonſtrated againſt the cruel edict, which had gone forth for the entire extirpation of her countrymen, and earneſtly petitioned that both ſhe and they might be reſcued from the intended maſſacre. She further charged Haman with contriving that horrid wickedneſs: and inſtantly the incenſed monarch commanded him to be dragged away, and to be hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The eſtates alſo of the diſcarded miniſter were confiſcated; and, being left to Eſther's diſpoſal, they were transferred to Mordecai, who was then advanced to the higheſt dignities in the ſtate, and appointed ſucceſſor to Haman †. Still the ſanguinary decree remained, which Eſther, therefore, with tears and importunity beſought the king to repeal. This would have been contrary to the principle of the Perſian government, which permitted not its laws to be changed; and yet, to prevent the miſchievous effects of his former edict, he iſſued out a ſecond, allowing the Jews throughout the whole empire to arm themſelves, and to ſlay all thoſe who ſhould dare to attack them.

The gracious interpoſition of God, in favour of this perſecuted people, became ſo conſpicuous, that not only they themſelves perceived and acknowledged it with gratitude and joy, but others alſo felt a ſecret re-

* Eſth. vii. 1, &c. † viii. 1, &c.

verence

verence for them, joined their ſociety, and embraced their religion. At length the deciſive day arrived; and, though ſo remarkable an alteration had taken place in their behalf, and the ſovereign had avowed himſelf their friend, ſo much enmity againſt them ſtill ſubſiſted, that great numbers roſe up with an intent to deſtroy them *. But here again the Lord helped them, and fought their battles for them. Such was the influence of Mordecai, ſuch the impreſſion made upon the minds of men concerning them, that they had many powerful patrons and aſſiſtants; and thus they obtained an eaſy and complete victory over their adverſaries. "No man could withſtand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people." Above ſeventy-five thouſand perſons were ſlain on that occaſion, through their malicious oppoſition to the cauſe of God; and it is particularly noticed, that the ten ſons of Haman periſhed miſerably.

How ſignal, then, was the confuſion, how entire the ruin, of the enemies of the Church! "The heathen are ſunk down in the pit that they made: in the net, which they hid, is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment, which He executeth: the wicked is ſnared in the work of his own hands. For lo! thine enemies, O Lord, for lo! thine enemies ſhall periſh: all the workers of iniquity ſhall be ſcattered †." Let us not envy the proſperity of ſinners; for "their triumphing is ſhort." They ſhall be driven away in their wickedneſs, and ſhall receive their

* Eſth. ix. 1, &c. † Pſal. ix. 15, 16. xcii. 9.

punishment, infinitely more tremendous than can be now conceived, in the world to come. Then the scene will indeed be changed; inasmuch as the proudest and most furious persecutors shall be ashamed and confounded for their hatred of true religion, and, instead of their profane scoffs and sensual mirth, "they shall lie down in sorrow," and experience throughout eternity "weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth."

Blessed be God, the hands of violence are restrained in our favoured nation; but is there nothing of the spirit of Haman discovered? What mean all the contemptuous speeches, and the cruel derisions, which wound the reputation of those, who profess an ardent esteem for the Saviour, and tread in his steps? Let us ask the scorners, Against whom do ye sport yourselves? Is it not against Him, who will avenge the insults put upon his people? "Can your hearts endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that he shall deal with you *?" Can you ward off the stroke of his justice, or stand against it? O confess your folly, implore forgiveness, and join yourselves to those, who are even now the objects of his care and love, and will be of his approbation and delight for ever.

The providence of God in protecting his Church not only excited much thanksgiving at that time, but gave rise to an annual festival, the feast of Purim †, which is observed to this day, and by which the reality

* Ezek. xxii. 14.

† That is, the feast of Lots, so called from the lots cast by Haman, to fix the exact time of the destruction, which he had planned.

of

of this history is clearly confirmed. The whole transaction displayed the goodness and faithfulness of God towards them that fear him, and tended, under his controlling influence, to advance the interests of truth and righteousness. Mordecai filled his important station with ability and integrity, and in all the height of his prosperity appeared the firm friend of his despised brethren*. As he exerted his power for such a purpose, it is probable that he patronized those zealous reformers, Ezra and Nehemiah, and procured them their commissions for the better regulation of the city and temple of Jerusalem. Thus he proved an extensive blessing in his generation.

The Lord's merciful deliverances of his people should be had in remembrance. Let the glory of them all be given to Himself: and, from our past experience, let us be encouraged to rely upon Him in every succeeding season of darkness and distress. He has often manifested the same gracious concern for the support and enlargement of his Church in modern times: and we may cheerfully leave the preservation of it to Him, for He has said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it†." We lament, that infidelity and profaneness seem to gain ground amongst us; but, since "The Lord reigneth," we rejoice in the hope, that He will vindicate the cause of his Gospel, and raise up instruments for its defence and propagation. Let us enquire, Are we ourselves faithful and diligent in doing the work of God, according to our place and ability?

* Esth. x. 3. † Matt. xvi. 18.

Do not ſome, who ought to be moſt active, diſcover a ſhameful remiſſneſs? "Becauſe iniquity abounds, the love of many waxes cold." Others evidently care for none of theſe things, being ſolicitous only to procure ſenſual gratifications, or worldly conveniencies. Theſe, indeed, are not perſecutors, but they are not friends, of Chriſtianity. Nay, their very indifference betrays a ſovereign contempt of it; and accordingly our Lord ranks them among his enemies *.

But, from the hiſtory before us, we may derive inſtruction and encouragement for all the ſincere members of the Church. Marvel not, if you belong to this ſociety, that there are thoſe who ſeek your ruin. Is it ſtrange, that, as in old times "he that was born after the fleſh perſecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even ſo it is now †?" Or, why ſhould you be dejected in your troubles, as if the promiſe would fail? The caſes of ancient ſaints ſhould teach you to expect deliverance, even when you ſee no probable way. Only wait in faith and prayer, and the final iſſue will be ſafe and glorious. Though you ſhould go down to the grave under contempt and oppreſſion, ſtill your ſalvation is ſure through our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, who will put all your enemies under your feet for ever.—Nor is this conſolation applicable only to the ſtrongeſt believers; for He pays a regard, a peculiarly tender regard, to the weakeſt of his people, and exerciſes as minute and affectionate a care towards each one,

* Matt. xii. 30. † Gal. iv. 29.

as if that one comprifed the whole. He has obtained the victory for himfelf, and enfured it to all his faithful followers. Whatever, then, be your prefent difficulties, it becomes you to rejoice and fing, in expectation of your future triumph. Take up your words, and fay, " In all thefe things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us*."

* Rom. viii. 37.

CONCLUSION.

CHAP. XXII.

Scripture Characters, chiefly confined to the saints—an illustrious company—exhibit true religion—shew the efficacy of divine grace—testify of Christ—display the excellence of faith—exhort us to run the spiritual race—laying aside every weight, especially the besetting sin—to maintain patience, and to look unto Jesus.

OUR short account of the principal histories in the old testament has exhibited the characters of some presumptuous sinners: such were Cain, Pharaoh, Balaam, Saul, Ahab, and Belshazzar. But our attention has been chiefly turned towards the saints of God, "the excellent of the earth," "redeemed from amongst men;" who were the means of continuing the Church, of supporting religion in the world, and gradually opening the way for the appearance of the great Redeemer. Here, then, we make a solemn pause; and, in order to fix a deeper impression on our minds in favour of true piety, we once more direct our regard to persons of the latter description.

The ancient "fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever*?" They have passed in succession before us: and we observe, that when they

* Zech. i. 5.

had

had severally acted their parts, they retired and gave place to others. Having quitted the earth, they have now entered on a more glorious state of existence, and "received the end of their faith," amidst the numerous society of "the spirits of just men made perfect." Their condition is unalterably determined; but does not our's yet appear in suspense? Do we in any measure resemble them? Or have we any just ground of hope and expectation, that we shall attain the same blessed inheritance? They were useful in their day, their light shone around them: they were all as so many witnesses for God, while they lived, bearing testimony to His truth, and teaching men by their examples and instructions the nature and necessity of unfeigned and fervent devotion. Even now also, "being dead, they yet speak" to us. O let their voice be heard, and their exhortations complied with! They may be considered as looking on all the followers of the Lamb, and encouraging them to "endure to the end." They can tell us, how excellent is the service, in which we are engaged; how faithful and gracious the Master, whom we are called to obey; how sufficient the support, which He will administer under all our trials; how sure and glorious the recompence, which He will finally bestow. This is the representation of an inspired writer; this the application, which he makes of SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS. After recounting the achievements of the ancient worthies, he thus closes the subject, "Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily be-

set

ſet us, and let us run with patience the race that is ſet before us, looking unto Jeſus, the author and finiſher of our faith*."

While we are ſtruggling with many and ſevere difficulties in the ways of God, the caſes of thoſe, who have trodden the road before us, may afford us ſome relief and conſolation. We may be dejected, perhaps, on account of the ſmall number of thoſe, who fear God: but if we extend our view to paſt ages, and conſider what an illuſtrious company of this very deſcription, from righteous Abel to the coming of Jeſus Chriſt, have finiſhed their courſe honourably, and "entered into the joy of their Lord;" we ſhall find that we are far from being ſingular, and that our conduct is ſufficiently juſtified, our hopes confirmed, by the examples of a large and moſt excellent ſociety. "We are compaſſed about with a great cloud of witneſſes."

Let us examine their teſtimony. It will be allowed that they exhibit a pattern of true religion, and ſhew us, "what manner of perſons we ought to be in all holy converſation and godlineſs:" for in each of them we diſcover ſomething to be admired and imitated. Did they manfully reſiſt temptation, and dare to differ from their reſpective generations in principle and practice, thereby incurring contempt and oppoſition? They teach us, that we muſt "come out and be ſeparate" from ſinners, and that it were vain to look for the friendſhip of the world, if we would be the friends of God. Were they attentive to the worſhip, and zeal-

* Heb. xii. 1, 2.

eouſly

ously concerned for the glory, of God, exerting all their influence to bring others to the knowledge and the love of Him? We should conclude, that it is equally incumbent upon us to possess the same pious affections towards God and man, the same courage and perseverance in promoting real godliness. While we perceive their steadfast reliance on the Redeemer, their lively expectations through the divine Covenant, and their exemplary conduct; we learn the necessity, and admire the beauteous connection and harmony, of those three leading graces, faith, hope, and charity, in all the heirs of heaven.

We shall scarcely be called to any place or circumstances, but we may discover in one or other of them a direction for our behaviour, a pattern for our imitation. Are we doubtful, how we ought to act? Let us ask, not, What is the practice or the wish of the world around us? but, What would Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, or Daniel have done, in a similar situation? We need not be afraid of following such precedents as these. Are we tempted to betray the cause of Christ, and turn apostates, that we may not suffer persecution? Let us enquire, Which of the saints of old would have recommended or taken such a step? Or if ungodly men would persuade us, that there is nothing in religion worth contending for: let us consult former generations; and the lives and deaths of many, whose characters we have contemplated, will sufficiently prove its truth, its importance, and unspeakable value. Though it may almost be laughed out of countenance among ourselves, we dare pronounce

nounce from their united teſtimony, that it is not a fraud, a mere fancy, or deluſion, but a ſolid reality, which will ſupport and comfort the ſoul in deepeſt diſtreſſes, and procure an ample recompence to all its faithful votaries. Let us poſſeſs the grace for which they were conſpicuous, and we alſo ſhall bear witneſs, that all the precepts and appointments of our God are right and excellent, that He delighteth in the proſperity of his ſervants, and that his ways are ways of pleaſantneſs and peace.

Their high attainments may ſeem to exalt them ſo far above us, as to forbid all our hopes of imitation. But ſhould we enquire of them, "Who made you to differ from others?" They would all reply, "In us, that is in our fleſh, dwelt no good thing; neither have we any thing, that we did not receive: for the Lord alone hath wrought all our works in us." And will not ſuch a declaration ſuggeſt the ſtrongeſt encouragement? For now we perceive in them, what the grace of God enables his people to do. When we view the faith of Abraham, the meekneſs of Moſes, the patience of Job, the ardent devotion of David, the unſhaken courage and integrity of Daniel and his three companions, who "jeoparded their lives unto the death," we do not merely admire the excellence of the men, but we praiſe God, "who makes his ſtrength perfect in weakneſs," and we are led to pray, that He would "work in us both to will and to do, and fulfil in us all the good pleaſure of his goodneſs."

Do you plead your utter inability to copy their example? We refer you to Him, "whoſe grace is ſufficient

ficient for you," and assure you, that "His hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear*." But if you remain proud, malicious, vindictive, covetous, or intemperate, "are ye not carnal, and walk as men†?" The knowledge of the Saviour would subdue in you these evil affections; and his Spirit would render you, as it did the ancient saints, humble, patient, devout, and heavenly-minded. For the fruit thereof "is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance‡."

Should we examine further into the testimony of these witnesses, they would all agree in declaring the infinite value of Christ, and the efficacy of a firm reliance upon Him. We need not here enquire, with what degree of clearness they understood the great plan of salvation, or compare the different revelations delivered to the Church in the different ages of the world. Suffice it to say, that they were divinely instructed to look forwards to the appearance of a glorious personage as the Redeemer of sinners, and to fix their whole dependence on Him. The Gospel, therefore, was preached to them, as well as to us; and the Lord Jesus Christ was the grand object of their desire, as he should be of our's. To Him our first parent Adam directed his regard, when he received the original promise of "the seed of the woman§." Righteous Abel trusted in Him, when he offered an excellent sacrifice by faith‖. "Abraham rejoiced to see His day; and he

* 2 Cor. xii. 9. Isa. lix. 1. † 1 Cor. iii. 3. ‡ Gal. v. 22, 23.
§ Gen. iii. 15. ‖ Heb. xi. 4.

ſaw it, and was glad*" Moſes wrote and propheſied much concerning Him, as "the end of the law for righteouſneſs to every one that believeth †." David throughout his pſalms, "teſtified the ſufferings of Chriſt, and the glory that ſhould follow;" and with his dying breath ſang his praiſe, while he exulted in "the everlaſting Covenant, ordered in all things and ſure ‡." Jeremiah proclaimed his name as "The Lord our righteouſneſs;" and Daniel alſo declared that "Meſſiah the Prince ſhould be cut off, to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlaſting righteouſneſs §."

We need not add more. "Many prophets and righteous men deſired to ſee thoſe things, which we ſee, and have not ſeen them; and to hear thoſe things which we hear, and have not heard them ‖."—"They received not the promiſe," in the full completion; "God having provided ſome better thing for us, that they without us ſhould not be made perfect ¶." Would they not, then, exhort us, "Prize your opportunities, and be thankful that the clear light of the Goſpel ſhines upon you? O conſider the excellency and the worth of the Saviour, who is evidently ſet forth crucified among you! See that ye refuſe him not. While he comes to bleſs you, let every heart be open to receive him; for he is the chiefeſt among ten thouſand, and altogether lovely. Look unto Him, and be ye ſaved

* John, viii. 56. † Luke, xxiv. 27. John, v. 46. Rom. x. 4. ‡ Luke, xxiv. 44. 1 Pet. i. 11. 2 Sam. xxiii. 1—5. § Jer. xxiii. 6. Dan. ix. 24.—26. ‖ Matt. xiii. 17. ¶ Heb. xi. 39, 40.

all the ends of the earth. Elſe, how ſhall you eſcape, if you neglect ſo great ſalvation?"

What regard do we pay to their teſtimony? Do we deſire, as they did, to look into the great myſtery of godlineſs? Alas! is it not generally ſlighted or deſpiſed? Many will not ſeriouſly examine it, but turn away from it with diſguſt, and reproach thoſe as fools and enthuſiaſts, who ſeem to be properly affected by it and concerned for its advancement. Let us, however, be wiſe for ourſelves, and "know the time of our viſitation," leſt theſe ancient witneſſes riſe up in judgment to condemn us.

They exhibit an indubitable proof of the advantage and powerful effects of believing in the Saviour. Faith conſtituted the moſt diſtinguiſhed part of their character; and to this principle we are taught to aſcribe their eminent attainments in holineſs, and uſefulneſs in the world. We appeal to the ſhort abſtract of their hiſtory in the eleventh chapter of the epiſtle to the Hebrews, as a full confutation of the prevailing notion, that faith relaxes moral obligations, and leads to licentiouſneſs. There we ſee, not only that a reliance upon the promiſes of God is pleaſing to Him, and procures all ſpiritual bleſſings, but alſo that it regulates the tempers of the mind and the general conduct of the life, ſo as to incline and enable men to perform the moſt arduous duties, in contempt of the ſevereſt ſufferings. We are aſſured, that "by it the elders obtained a good report*." With an inflexible perſeverance they reſiſted all enticements to evil,

* Heb. xi. 2.

and defied the menaces of their ſtrongeſt enemies; becauſe they believed God, and could truſt themſelves in his hands, depending on his engagements in the Covenant.

Many warm advocates for the doctrines of Revelation, poſſibly, may be inattentive to works of righteouſneſs. But the reaſon is, they poſſeſs not the principle to which they pretend. What was Abel, Enoch, Noah, Daniel, and Job? Were they not exemplary patterns of practical religion? and yet by faith alone they attained this eminence. Would you follow their ſteps? Seek to bring your hearts under the influence of God's truth. Receive and credit his word as they did, and you will manifeſt all the graces of the Chriſtain character; you will gain the victory over your ſpiritual adverſaries, and triumph againſt the world, the fleſh, and the Devil. But unbelief would keep you under the bondage of corruption; for with ſuch a temper of mind you would be enſlaved, if not to groſs ſenſuality, yet to ſecret pride, which is equally deteſtable; and ſin, in one ſhape or another, would retain its dominion over you.

What concluſion, then, do we draw from the atteſtation of theſe witneſſes? We cannot be at a loſs for the application. If They were ſo much in earneſt, let none of Us trifle. If they had ſuch a regard to the intereſt of religion, we ought not to be aſhamed of it. If they poſſeſſed ſo devout and cordial an eſteem for Chriſt, when his grace and glory were obſcured under the types and ſhadows of the law, with what admiration, love, gratitude, and obedience, ſhould we look up to him,

him, ſince the true light of the Goſpel now ſhineth with all the brightneſs of the meridian ſun! May we not add with the Apoſtle, "Let us lay aſide every weight, and the ſin which doth ſo eaſily beſet us, and let us run with patience the race that is ſet before us, looking unto Jeſus, the author and finiſher of our faith?"

We are called to a conteſt, as were the ſaints of old. This may be fitly compared to a race, in which many perſons are engaged, and all aim at the ſame prize. The diligence and ardour, neceſſary for thoſe who vie with each other in running, are equally ſo for thoſe who would ſave their ſouls, and gain an admiſſion into heaven. Every nerve muſt be ſtrained, the whole man exerted, and the reward, enſured to each ſucceſsful competitor, will be glorious indeed; not a corruptible crown, but an incorruptible. This is a matter of univerſal concern. "The race is ſet before us:" The conteſt is propoſed to us all; and the path is marked out, in which we muſt proceed; nor are we at liberty to choose another. We muſt likewiſe obſerve the rules, which are minutely preſcribed: for "no man is crowned, except he ſtrive lawfully." Come, then, give in your names, and enter the liſts; encouraged by thoſe worthy characters, who have gone before, who have finiſhed their courſe with joy, and obtained the victory.

For this end, you muſt "lay aſide every weight," caſt off the things which are moſt dear and profitable, if they would delay your progreſs. Thoſe, who are oppreſſed with a heavy burden, cannot move with ſpeedy ſteps; for they are prevented from making the ne-

ceſſary efforts. And thus many are obſtructed in the Chriſtian race by the cares and vanities of the world, the pleaſures or the pride of life. Are you candidates for heaven? Will you not, then, part with that, whatever it may be, which proves an hindrance to you? Or will you not enquire, what has impeded or retarded you? To what ſhall we aſcribe your ſlow advancement? Are you not retaining, or deſiring, forbidden enjoyments, going after covetouſneſs, or fooliſh amuſements? and are not your affections divided between things temporal, and things eternal? Would you "ſo run, that you may obtain;" you muſt "forget those things which are behind, and reach forth unto thoſe things which are before, and preſs toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Chriſt Jeſus*." But, while you loiter, time paſſes away; the day of grace is expiring; the ſeaſon allotted for exertion will ſoon be cloſed; and, when the night cometh, the conteſt will be finally decided, and no more renewed for ever.

Sin, then, of every kind muſt be immediately renounced: but there is one ſin particularly dangerous. It is that, "which doth ſo eaſily beſet us;" to which we are moſt inclined, and by which we are moſt frequently overcome. This may be different in different perſons: the conſtitution of your bodies, the natural tempers of your minds, your ſituations, connections, and employments in life, expoſe you to various ſnares. So the characters, we have delineated, are marked with peculiar failings: in ſome we have ſeen a tendency to

* Phil. iii. 13, 14.

pride, or covetouſneſs, in others to cowardice, or unbelief. You will readily diſcover your own weakneſs; and there eſpecially you muſt ſet and continue your watch. Do not ſpare your favourite, your boſom luſts; nor retain your right hand, or right eye, if they offend you*: but be reſolute, be determined to put them from you, though by a painful operation, rather than come ſhort of the prize. Would you ſay, This is a ſmall fault? So it may appear to you: but you are unfair judges; and you ſhould be reminded, that many have periſhed for ever, in conſequence of what they have accounted trivial faults. Not to mention, that one tranſgreſſion leads the way to another and a greater, we obſerve, that if there be a ſin more neceſſary to be abandoned than all the reſt, it is that "which moſt eaſily beſets you;" becauſe it is continually near you, ſoliciting indulgence; it aſſaults and baffles you, before you perceive the attack; and therefore it will moſt effectually prevent your advancement, if not accelerate your deſtruction.

In your ſpiritual courſe you are alſo required to "run with patience;" which implies that many and ſevere difficulties muſt be expected and endured. From the very compariſon of a race, it muſt be concluded, that ſtrenuous exertions are to be made; and it would be folly to object to Chriſtianity on this account. Yet do you not "faint in your minds, being wearied" and diſcouraged by the various trials, which you meet with? You complain of inward temptations and outward oppoſition, the corruptions of your nature,

* Matt. v. 29, 30.

the unkindneſs and treachery of friends, the frowns of the world, diſappointments and loſſes in trade, and the ſuggeſtions of your grand adverſary the Devil; and you ſeem to wonder, "as if ſome ſtrange thing had happened unto you." You forget, "that the ſame afflictions are accompliſhed in your brethren," and that you cannot enter the kingdom any otherwiſe, than "through much tribulation *." Look at the generations of old: were not the faithful ſervants of God in every age oppreſſed with ſimilar or greater troubles? Yet they perſevered in a calm and peaceful expectation of a glorious recompenſe. "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have ſpoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of ſuffering affliction and of patience. Behold, we count them happy, which endure †." Then renew the conteſt with freſh vigour; or, though "faint, yet purſue." For conſider the terrible conſequences, if you relinquiſh the race, and draw back: ſhame, confuſion, torment and deſpair will be your portion for ever.

One further direction is added to all thoſe, who are competitors for the heavenly prize: "Look unto Jeſus the author and finiſher of your faith." This is ſo important, that the obſervance of all other rules, however excellent, would avail nothing without it. You cannot hold on your way, unleſs you receive continual ſupplies of ſtrength: and ſuch ſupplies are to be obtained only by an application to the Saviour. While, therefore, you feel and lament your weakneſs, lift up your eyes to Him. You are ready to ſtumble and to

* 1 Pet. v. 9. Acts, xiv. 22. † James, v. 10, 11.

fall;

fall; but he reacheth forth his hand to support and invigorate your souls. "He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. ——They, that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint*."

You must "look unto Jesus" also, for your entire acceptance with God, as well as for ability to persevere. You cannot demand an admission into heaven, on the ground of merit, for your own fidelity and diligence; but you may implore and expect forgiveness, peace, and eternal life, through the atoning sacrifice and prevailing intercession of your great High Priest. "The crown of righteousness," to which you aspire, is the purchase of his blood, the gift of his love.

But while you depend upon his righteousness for your whole salvation, you are to pay a continual regard to his example. Many illustrious characters have been set before you: but the grand pattern of all excellence and perfection yet remains to be exhibited. He, indeed, infinitely surpasses and eclipses the rest. If the others be as stars in the firmament, this glorious Luminary even exceeds the sun in its brightness. Fix your eyes on Him, till you partake of his splendour. "Look unto Him," to observe the steps in which He trod; for as He was in this world, so must you be: and you are to be followers of the saints, only so far as they were of Christ †.

* Isa. xl. 29—31. † 1 Cor xi. 1.

"He is the author and finisher of our faith." He has instituted the race, and invited you to the contest. He has pointed out the way; He also will encourage and strengthen you, throughout the course: He waits at the end to receive you; He will then publicly declare his approbation of you before men and angels, "Well done, good and faithful servants;" and with his own hands He will put upon you the crown of unfading glory.

O what acclamations of gratitude and love to Jesus will resound from all the Church triumphant! Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, and Martyrs, as well as inferior saints, will acknowledge, to the praise of his rich and sovereign mercy, "He was the author and the finisher of our faith: To Him we are indebted for the beginning, the progress, and the completion of his grace in our souls." They will bow with supreme adoration before Him, and say, "Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests. Therefore, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever *!" Amen.

* Rev. v. 9, 10, 13.

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